

Chōla Murals



P.S. SRIRAMAN

Chōla Murals

*Documentation and Study of the
Chōla Murals of Br̥hadīśvara Temple, Thanjavur*

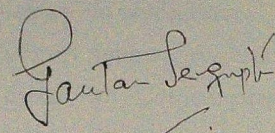
P.S. SRIRAMAN



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Way back in 1968, C. Sivaramamurti observed: "*These paintings have more than graceful line. They please all tastes. ... one stares in wonder at the wealth of imagination and the inventive skill of those responsible for such glorious creations*". The work now provides an opportunity to all to appreciate these murals in all their richness and complexities. I am very pleased to place this book before the general readers and the scholarly community on the eve of the millennium celebration of the great temple.

I congratulate the author, the printers and all others associated with the project.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Gautam Sengupta' in a cursive style.

(Gautam Sengupta)

Director General

New Delhi

February 01, 2011

Preface

Prof. S.K. Govindaswami of Annamalai University, Chidambaram discovered the magnificent murals of Chōla period in the dim passage around the sanctum of the Brihadiśvara temple at Thanjavur possibly on 9 April 1931. For over seven decades, the murals were not comprehensively documented, save for one attempt in 1950's, due to lack of space and light. Early in 2004, the author suggested the need for a comprehensive photographic documentation of the murals to T. Satyamurthi, the then Superintending Archaeologist of Chennai Circle. He felt that photographing the murals in bits and pieces, as was done before, did not help in any way in understanding the composition in full. Therefore, the documentation must aim at bringing a whole panel in a single frame. Such an output, he felt, should not be distorted in perspective. When I proposed the concept of present documentation, he graciously permitted me to undertake it and provided all administrative support. Later on, he guided me in interpreting the panels with his academic inputs. Without his sustained support this study would have remained a dream for me. I am extremely thankful to him.

Shri N. Thyagarajan, a young photographer and an accomplished painter joined us to take up the challenge. He provided the right technical solution and identified the montaging technique was the best option. He executed the whole project systematically, and with every step, honed his technical skills to achieve the desired results. His perseverance and patience resulted in this wonderful gift to the world of connoisseurs. N. Thyagarajan deserves complete credit for the technical success of this project.

I am deeply beholden to Dr. Gautam Sengupta, Director General, Archaeological Survey of India for recognising the significance of this work and publishing it on the August and appropriate occasion of the 1000th year celebrations of the consecration of the temple. For the past two years, Dr. B.R. Mani, Joint Director General, was mildly cajoling me now and then to complete the manuscript at the earliest. I am deeply moved by his

encouragement. Dr. P.K. Trivedi, Director (Publication) made the onerous task of publishing this volume at short notice easy by his gentle advice. Dr. Arundhati Banerji, Superintending Archaeologist (Publication) will always be a source of inspiration to me. I owe my gratefulness to her. The manuscript became more readable with the editing Sarva Shri T. Satyamurthi and K.K. Ramamurthi. I thank them for their efforts and valuable suggestions. My special thanks are due to Hoshiar Singh, Production Officer, for his untiring efforts in producing this book. From Macmillan, the dedicated team of Suresh Gopal, Jyoti Mehrotra and Rajbilochan Prasad deserve all appreciation for their contributions to get this volume produced at such a short notice.

The digital enhancement of the documentation files led to better understanding and interpretation of the murals, which is incorporated in this volume. There could be more studies on other aspects of the murals like the dress, personal ornamentation, coiffure, social life, significance of dance postures, etc., or an evaluation of the art in comparison to other schools. Utilising the images, these tasks will be done later. The colour reproductions are true as much as possible to the original, as seen under artificial light. I have tried my best to transliterate words of other languages by adopting both the international standards (ISO) and that of the Survey, to make it easy for the readers to understand the words.

I tearfully remember the encouragement received right through my career from my Guru, Dr. B. Narasimhaiah, who would be the happiest man to see this volume. But, destiny is something different as he is no more to guide me. I dedicate this volume to him.

My wife and daughter have always supported me right through. They were happily accustomed to my long absence during the documentation. I am grateful to them as well.

P.S. Sriraman

Acknowledgements

Many persons had directly and indirectly helped me in the preparation of this volume like Smt. Sathyabhama Badhreenath, Superintending Archaeologist, Chennai Circle for her encouragement and sparing me from my official work to concentrate on the preparation of the volume, Smt. Neethi Anil Kumar, K. Kanniappan, M. Ramakoteswara Rao and K.V. Kailsasm of Fort Museum for supporting my efforts, Drs Padma Subrahmanyam, S. Balusamy, D. Dayalan and S. Rajavelu for support and encouragement, Prof. S. Swaminathan, Dr. Harini Seshadri and M.V. Visweswara for correcting the initial drafts, and my well-wishers S.V. Venkateshaiah, Muhammad K.K., Dr. Arun Raj, Dr. C.S. Seshadri, Ch. Babji Rao, K. Kamraj and Arun Malik. I am thankful to all of them. I thank my fellow members in *Ponniyin Selvan* group for their encouragement.

The Editor, *The Hindu*, was kind enough to permit me to reproduce some illustrations prepared by S.K. Govindaswami and provided the scanned images from its archives, the courtesy is duly acknowledged.

The line drawings are adopted with some modifications from the Tamil version of this book published by Tamil University, Thanjavur. The scholarly community in general and the author in particular are indebted to Dr. M. Rajenderan, Vice-Chancellor, Tamil University for publishing the documentation in Tamil with excellent line drawings, which added a new dimension to the photographic documentation.

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Rājarāja, the Great

Exactly one thousand years ago, the Chōla emperor Rājarāja I (AD 985- 1014, hereafter Rājarāja) was redefining the skyline of his capital Thanjavur by constructing the great temple of Rājarājēśvaram, popularly known as the Brihadīśvara temple (hereafter Rājarājēśvaram). Apart from conceptualizing and executing this architectural splendour of gigantic proportions, he was also embellishing it, tastefully and carefully, with an array of sculptures and exquisite murals. It is presumed to have taken a decade for Rājarāja to complete the construction of the temple and embellish it befittingly. It was a Herculean effort to conceptualise and construct a temple that was many times larger than the largest temple known at that time. Evidently, it involved massive exploitation and transportation of resources, meticulous planning and complex logistics. Not only did he build a temple which has survived the test of time as a gigantic structure, but also endowed it so well that it could function as a vibrant institution for long. His sister, queens, high-ranking officials and other sections of society gave munificent contributions. Innumerable endowments helped the temple in becoming an active locus for art forms like, music, continuous recitation of hymns, devotional dances, and painting. To understand the murals of this temple, the subject matter of this book, it is imperative to understand the persona of Rājarāja since his role in every aspect of the temple was paramount.

Rājarāja's Accession and Military Exploits

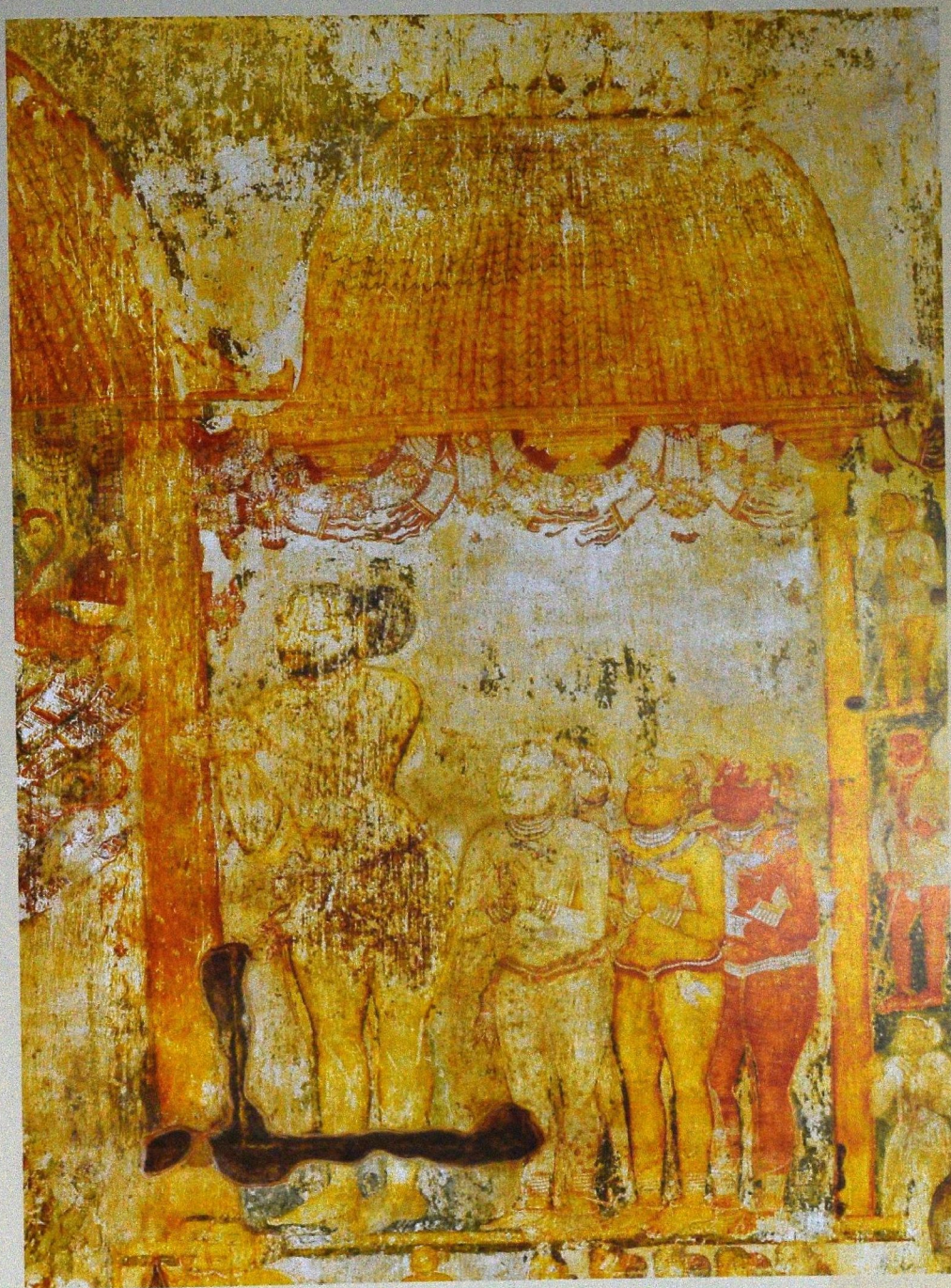
Rājarāja's accession to the Chōla throne, *circa* AD 985, is unique in the annals of Indian history. When his father, Sundara Chōla died, he was the rightful heir to the throne and also the popular choice as well. At the same time, he was unable not ascend the throne, because his uncle, Uttama desired to rule the Chōla kingdom. Uttama was probably an infant at the time of his father Gaṇḍarāditya's (AD 949-957) death. The Chōla country was still recovering from the devastating invasion of the Rāshtrakūṭas under Kṛishṇa III. Therefore, the Chōla throne passed on to Ariṇjaya (AD 956-957), the able brother of Gaṇḍarāditya, and then on to his son, Sundara Chōla (AD 956-973). Uttama seems to have laid claims to the throne when Sundara Chōla died. Rājarāja, Sundara Chōla's surviving son, could have authoritatively and legitimately refused the throne to his uncle, because the line of succession had changed for two generations. There was a pressing need for an

able ruler, because the Chōlas were just regaining their hold over Tonḍaimaṇḍalam, which had been lost to the Rāshtrakūṭas. Rājarāja's elder brother Āditya Karikāla, who played an important role in efforts to regain the lost areas and consolidate Chōla power, was assassinated, possibly with Uttama's connivance. All these happenings, could have strengthened Rājarāja in asserting his right. According to the Tiruvālaṅgāḍu plates, subjects of the kingdom were rooting for the able Aruḷmoḷivarman (later Rājarāja) to be crowned as king.¹ Rājarāja was young and could have reacted emotionally. Yet, he showed extraordinary wisdom and restraint in choosing to wait by allowing his uncle Uttama (AD 973-985) to rule until his death. Thus, he avoided bitterness amongst relatives and political confusion within the kingdom.²

Rājarāja was born as Aruḷmoḷivarman to Sundara Chōla and his queen Vāṇavaṇ Mādēvi under the asterism *Sadayam* (*Satābhishak*) during the Tamil calendar month of *Ippasi*.³ As stated earlier, he was of the requisite age for ascending the throne at the time of his father's death, but bided his time to ascend the throne, which he finally did in *circa* AD 985. Rājarāja was the name assumed at the time of the coronation. His military exploits are well documented in the long *meikīrti*, an eulogy with which all his inscriptions begin. According to the *meikīrti*, he began his campaign against the Chēra and the Pāṇḍyas. This conflict with the Pāṇḍyas made him to undertake an expedition to Sri Lanka also. The northern part of it, Īlam, was brought firmly under the Chōla rule. He then turned his attention to engage the Chāḷukyas, as both the powers were interested in the Andhra region. The rightful heir of the Vēṅgi kingdom took refuge in the Chōla country and Rājarāja was bound to help him. Satyāśraya, the Chāḷukyan king tried to take advantage of the situation at Vēṅgi, by invading the region. Therefore, Rājarāja had to send a large army under his son Rājendra to attack the Chāḷukyan region, which made Satyāśraya to retreat back to his country. This enabled the Vēṅgi family to get strongly united with the Chōlas through matrimonial relations. In between these major wars, he made efforts to annihilate minor powers like the Gaṅgas and Noḷambas and also undertook a naval expedition to the Male islands. In fact, he was waging wars well into the last years of his rule. Nevertheless, he was sufficiently focused on administering his kingdom by strengthening the bureaucracy and was also equally involved in religious activities.

Rājarāja, *Sivapādaśēkhara*, 'One (who has) the feet of Śiva as (his) crest'

If Rājarāja's military exploits were immense, his pursuit of *bhakti-mārga* was even more outstanding. Devotion to Śiva was deeply embedded in the Chōla dynasty as many of Rājarāja's ancestors, right from the Saṅgam age, were ardent devotees of Śiva and active builders of temples for Śiva. Āditya I, son of the first ruler Vijayālaya, was said to have built



A depiction of Rājarāja and his principal queens worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil'

over one hundred temples along the banks of the Kaveri right from Kudagu (Coorg).⁴ Āditya's son and successor Parāntaka I proclaimed his devotion to Śiva by covering the roof of the Chidambaram temple with gold, because of which he earned the title 'Poṇvēindapperumāl'. Naṭarāja of Tillai (Chidambaram) became the tutelary deity (*kulaṇāyagam*) of the Chōla family. Parāntaka built numerous temples for Śiva.⁵ Gaṇḍarāditya, who succeeded Parāntaka, wrote hymns on Naṭarāja of Chidambaram, which are included in the *Tiruvisaippā*, a collection of hymns forming the ninth *Tirumurai*. Sembiyan Mādēvi, Gaṇḍarāditya's wife was a celebrated patron and her religious endowments over several decades are unmatched.⁶ Even though she became a widow at a young age, she was an active patron until her death at an advanced age. She built or rebuilt a large number of temples during nearly six decades of patronage.⁷ She also ordered casting of numerous metal images, which was her outstanding contribution to the religious art of Tamil Nadu.

It is no surprise that Rājarāja carried forward the staunch and unflinching devotion to Śiva, which he displayed in abundance, literally and figuratively. In all probability, he was greatly influenced by his ancestors, particularly his grand aunt's devotion and her munificence for the temples. Like all his predecessors, he built many temples and made generous endowments to them. However, the outstanding example of his devotion is the construction of the Rājarājēśvaram. The architecture of the temple is as grand as his unsullied devotion to Śiva, hence the conception of this temple, grand as it is, is unique and is exclusively due to him. In spite of waging wars and taking care of the administration of a vast kingdom, he was able to devote time and involve himself in the construction of this temple till the end of his life. The one and the only reason for this great effort probably was his unflinching devotion to the 'Lord of Dances', 'Āḍavallāṇ', which he manifested in several ways in the temple. Āḍavallāṇ's cosmic dance, a reflection of his omnipresence, is pervasive everywhere in the temple. For example, he displayed not only his devotion, but also made his literate subjects utter the name of God by simply adopting the name of God in the nomenclature of the measures. Every linear, volumetric and mass measure was named 'Āḍavallāṇ', while the minor weight used for measuring precious stones was called 'Dakṣiṇamēruviṭankar', which is also the name of another image of Naṭarāja. Every commodity, be it land, or the finest and tiniest of precious stones, were measured by these measures. Therefore, when there was an endowment or gift in kind, they were measured by appropriate measures of Āḍavallāṇ or 'Dakṣiṇamēruviṭankar'. When the physical measurements of the donation were meticulously recorded in the epigraphs, the words - Āḍavallāṇ and Dakṣiṇamēruviṭankar - were repeated many hundreds times. By this act, he was able to initiate his subjects into a deep sense of devotion as they were bound to repeat

the Lord's name as many times as they read these engravings. There is no better way of displaying one's devotion than by repeatedly chanting God's name (*nāma*). The theme of the Lord of Chidambaram dominates an entire panel in the murals, wherein the king along with his queens and retinue are worshipping in the Lord of the Chidambaram shrine. The depiction of Āḍavallāṇ is very magnificent and gigantic, truly reflecting the cosmic nature of his dance. Above all, his personal devotion is well and truly reflected in another panel wherein he offers worship to Āḍavallāṇ, along with the *liṅga* of the temple, by keeping a framed painting of the God by the side of the decorated *liṅga*.

Rājarāja's Donation of Images and Jewellery

Rājarāja's staunch faith is further attested by his donations of an array of metal images cast in solid gold, silver and the usual bronze/copper. He donated metal images of Naṭarāja known as Āḍavallāṇ and Dakṣiṇamēruviṭaṅkar, Taṇjaiviṭaṅkar, Mahā Mēruviṭaṅkar and copper images of Chaṇḍēśvara Prasāda Dēvar group, Pañchadēhamūrti, Subrahmaṇya, Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Mahāviṣṇu, and Gaṇēśa (seven numbers).⁸ Kundavai, his sister, presented images of the consorts for the Dakṣiṇamēruviṭaṅkar and Taṇjaiviṭaṅkar. In addition, a huge quantity of jewellery was also presented to these images by them.⁹ This munificence was a direct result of the collective and deep devotion for the Lord by the king and his elder sister. This set an example for his queens and other high officials to follow, who donated an array of Śaivite images. These include many forms of Śiva like Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Liṅgapurāṇadēvar, Pāsapatamūrti, Ardhanārīśvara, Kirātārjunīyamūrti, besides images of the Śaiva saints like Sundarar, Sambandar, Appar, Sirāḷadēvar, etc. The images of the king, his queen and guru too were cast and donated. From the inscriptions, it is possible to enumerate that about sixty-six images were cast and presented.¹⁰ This prolific casting of images of the Śaivite pantheon could not have happened, but for the initial spark provided by the king himself, because of his staunch devotion.

Rājarāja, his sister Kundavai, principal queens, officials and others donated huge quantities of gold ornaments, vessels, besides cash and other forms of endowments from their personal wealth to the Lord of Rājarājēśvaram and other images.¹¹ Obviously, Rājarāja took extraordinary care to register in minute detail all the endowments and gifts offered to the temple. He categorically states that the donations by all, including his own, should be engraved on the walls of the *Śrī Vimāna*.¹² The list of ornaments, vessels, images and other donations to the temple by Rājarāja and his sister, is a long one and it covered the entire *jagati* course of the *Śrī Vimāna*. Therefore, donations by others had to be engraved on the cloister *maṇḍapa*, even though it was against the spirit of the order of the

king. The meticulous way in which the inventory was registered and engraved on stone is astonishing, and a standing testimony to Rājarāja's systematic approach and clarity of his mind. A cursory glance through the record is sufficient to demonstrate that the art of jewellery making was at its best during those times.¹³ From the list engraved on the walls, the king and his sister gave away a few hundred kilograms of gold and silver, besides thousands of precious stones.¹⁴

Appointment of Singers and Dancers

In addition to donating material wealth, Rājarāja made many administrative and religious arrangements for the temple. Singing and dancing were two inseparable ways of worship during Chōla period. Accordingly, to recite the *Tirupatiyam*, the collection of hymns of the servitors, he appointed forty-eight *piḍārars* and musicians to accompany them.¹⁵ The longevity of the arrangement and the strength of the group were guaranteed by the clause that provides for deputing a suitable person from either their family, or anyone as a substitute, if those initially appointed could not continue due to any reason including migration. In the worshipping the Lord, the performance of dance cannot lag behind singing of hymns in praise of the God. More so, because his personal deity was Naṭarāja, the Lord of the dances, from whom all dances have originated. Therefore, he made a large endowment for the maintenance of four hundred dancing girls and their accompanying staff.¹⁶ To assist them during their performances and practice, dance-*āchāryas*, singers including those who could sing Sanskrit songs (*āriyam*), musicians who could play several instruments like *vāṅgiyam* (pipe), drummers (*uvacchar*) who could beat the small drum (*uḍukkai*, *ḍamaru*) and large ones (*koṭṭi-maddhalam*) were appointed, and their dues paid regularly. In addition, the farsightedness of Rājarāja is clearly reflected in the appointment of a chief accountant and sub-accountants, astrologers and their assistants, holders of the sacred parasol, water sprinklers, a person to maintain lamps, potters to supply ceramics, washermen to wash the clothes, barbers, tailors, including those who could stitch precious stones, carpenters besides other menial staff required for maintenance.

Creation and Management of the Resource Base

The individual patronage of Rājarāja, his sister, queens and others were indeed extraordinary, and was definitely an act of their devotion rather than of getting rid of their wealth. On the one hand, Rājarāja exhibited the deep devotion he had for Āḍavallāṇ with amazing donations, he demonstrated his acumen as an administrator by taking many measures on the other. His foresightedness and anxiety to see that the newly built temple should remain a vibrant institution for a long, long time to come, is clearly reflected in the recordings of the administrative set up he created for managing the temple. He was sure

that the temple would require a massive asset base. Therefore, he created several endowments and engraved their details very accurately on the walls of the temple, thereby making the assets of the temple known to future generations and making them accountable as well. When the locations of the inscriptions *vis-a-vis* their contents were examined, an interesting pattern emerges. While the epigraphs registering the personal gifts of the king and his dear sister are engraved on the *vimāna*, and their near ones on the *prākāra*, endowments in which the public was involved are inscribed on the outer elements of the temple like the *gōpuras* and the exterior surface of the *prākāra*. This seems to be deliberate with the intention of informing the public.

There are several such records showing in great detail the efforts of the king. For example, in three inscriptions engraved on the temple, the extent of the lands in several villages assigned by Rājarāja to the temple, and the amounts of revenue received in kind (paddy) and cash from the assigned lands are accurately recorded. It is estimated that approximately 115,000 *kalams* of paddy (measured by the standard measure named *Āḍavallāṇ*), 300 *kaḷaṇḍu* of gold and 2000 *kāsu* were provided for the temple to meet its expenses.¹⁷ As usual, the recordings of the extent of assigned lands in the inscription are very meticulous.

The policy of accommodating his subjects in the administration of the temple is further attested by an inscription recording the appointment of the guards for the temple.¹⁸ Rājarāja appointed, in all, one hundred and forty three persons as guards (*meikāppu*) for the temple. They were drawn from as many as one hundred and thirty one villages spread across the provinces of his kingdom. In order to widen representation, with a few exceptions, at the most, only one guard was drawn from any village. A cursory glance at the location of the villages indicates that they were located far and wide. This order was a personal order of the king and is engraved on the *Rājarājaṇ-tiruvāyil* (Rājarājaṇ-gateway).

Another inscription at the same place describes the staff appointed for administering the assets of the temple. He appointed several officials like treasurers (*paṇḍāri*), *brahmachārins* (*māṇi*) and accountants (*kaṇakkar*) and sub-accountants.¹⁹ It is also recorded that the temple employed about four *paṇḍāris*, one hundred and seventy *māṇis*, six accountants and twelve sub-accountants. Some of them were permanent staff, while others took charge on a rotation basis. This was a healthy management practice, as the management of finances did not always rest with the same set of people. In all probability, the village assembly that sent the person for work stood guarantee for the honesty of the person, and was held responsible for any misconduct or dereliction of duties.

Yet another record engraved at the same place, clearly delineates the management of livestock and a scheme by which shepherds (*iḍayans*) were to be benefitted.²⁰ In order to procure ghee in large quantities for burning lamps, the king assigned sheep to specified shepherd(s). A unit of ninety-six ewes and forty-eight cows, or sixteen she-buffalos was assigned for the supply for every *ulakku* of ghee per lamp. The donation was given to a particular shepherd, but the commitment to give the specified quantity of ghee was the moral and equal duty of his siblings as well, as they too were bound to herd the animals and enjoy the produce when raising livestock. It was also the responsibility of the shepherds to maintain the livestock at the same level, which means that the shepherds must take appropriate care of the herd and breed them properly. It was calculated that as many as four thousand, one hundred and twenty four cows and six thousand, nine hundred and twenty four ewes were endowed for the burning of about one hundred and fifty eight lamps.²¹

A small record interestingly brings out how Rājarāja made provisions for liquid money.²² Rājarāja placed three hundred and sixty *kāsu*s in the treasury of the temple with specific instructions that it must be utilized towards the cost of the plantains required for daily *pūjas*. This amount was not randomly deposited by the king, but arrived at after due calculations. The temple required fifty four thousand plantains in a year at the rate of one hundred and fifty per day, calculated for three hundred and sixty days only. The record further specifies that the cost of plantains was one thousand two hundred per *kāsu*. Therefore, they required forty-five *kāsu* to meet the expenses for procuring the plantains. At the prevailing rate of interest, which was twelve and a half percent, it required an investment of three hundred and sixty *kāsu*, which the king deposited. The amount was lent to the merchants at the rate of twelve and a half percent. The amount was not given to any one particular merchant, but to a guild of merchants from three principal markets from the suburbs of Thanjavur. This small record not only makes public the investments and terms of investments by the temple, but also a classic example of micro-financial management of the temple. The terms were binding on the traders. The rates for the plantains was fixed and made public, therefore it was not subject to the fluctuations in the market. Other commodities like cardamom seeds, *champakā* buds, *kahskahs* roots, *dhāl*, pepper, mustard, cumin, sugar, tamarind, curd, gram, salt, tender plantain leaves, areca-nuts, betel-leaves, camphor and pulses required for the temple, were similarly procured at fixed rates.

The already described efforts that were made by Rājarāja reflect his immense devotion for the Lord. Every single action of his, and orders for the administration of the temple in particular, and for Śaivism in general, overwhelmingly and absolutely justified his

assumption of the title *Śivapādaśekhara*, 'one (who has) the feet of Śiva as (his) crest'. His devotion is further evidenced by every aspect of the great architectural marvel he built. The murals too would have received the same attention from him, as they are an integral part of the temple. He must have played a decisive role in the choice of the location, themes and contents. In fact, a few significant design changes were initiated to accommodate the murals. A thorough understanding of the architecture is essential for appreciating the king's persona, as well the magnitude of the murals.

Notes

1. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol III, No. 205. Tiruvālaṅgāḍu Plates of Rājendra I, claims that '(Though) requested by the subjects (to occupy the Chōla throne), in order to destroy the persistently blinding darkness of the powerful Kali (age), Aruḷmolivarman who understood the essence of royal conduct, desired not the kingdom for himself even in (his) mind, while his paternal uncle coveted his (i.e. Aruḷmolivarman's) dominions' (Verse 69).
2. The chequered history of the Chōlas right from Saṅgam Age is well documented and extensively published. For a detailed account of the history of the Chōlas, see K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Chōlas* (Revised 2nd Ed., Madras 2000).
3. The birth of Rājārāja was celebrated in three verses in the Tiruvālaṅgāḍu plates, vv. 61-63. In many records, the asterism and the month of births are recorded. For example *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, No. 26, records the celebration of a twelve-day festival namely *Tirusatayattiruvīla*, a grand festival on the asterism of *Sadayam* in the Rājārājēśvaram.
4. M. A. Dhaky, 'Chōlas of Thanjavur Phase I' in M. W. Meister and M. A. Dhaky, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture, South India, Lower Drāviḍaḍeśa 200 B.C. - AD 1324* (Delhi, 1983), S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, *Early Chola Temples* (New Delhi, 1971) for a comprehensive account of temples of Aditya I.
5. *Ibid.* for a list of important temples of Parāntaka.
6. The earliest record of her munificence is dated to the thirty-fourth year of Parāntaka (*circa* AD 941) (*South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. I, No. 75) and the last known inscription referring to her is dated AD 1001, well into the sixteenth regnal year of Rājārāja. (*South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. I, No. 543). In between, her munificence is so voluminous. See B. Venkataraman, *Temple Art under the Chola Queens* (Faridabad, 1976), pp. 11-64.
7. M. A. Dhaky, *op. cit.*, S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, *op. cit.*, B. Venkataraman, *op. cit.*, for a list of temples built by her.
8. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, No. 1 mentions the donation of this image. *Ibid.*, No. 2, line four of the second section clearly states that 'Āḍavallār Dakṣiṇamēruviṭṭankar', indicating that it was an image of Naṭārāja.
9. B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras, 1985) pp. 290-326 has enumerated the gifts by the king, and his sister Kundavai in detail in Appendix 1 to 15. See also Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Tanjavur (AD 600-1850)* (Tanjavur, 1994, Tamil) pp. 257-288. About ninety-seven inscriptions have been copied from this temple and published in ARE for the years 1888, 1890, 1891, 1893, 1897, 1911, 1924, 1933, 1969, 1971 and 1972, besides a number of fragmentary inscriptions built into the walls of the *mahā-maṇḍapa*. Texts of the Chōla inscriptions have been published in the *South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. II, providing a plethora of information. Of the published inscriptions, sixty-four are of Rājārāja, and eighteen of Rājendra I, rest of others.
10. B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras, 1985), pp. 154-158, for a list of images donated by all to the Rājārājēśvaram. Also see Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *op. cit.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, no. 1.
13. V. Venkayya, *Introduction to South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. II, pp. 16-17. See B. Venkataraman, *op. cit.* for a complete list of types of ornaments mentioned in the epigraphs. *South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. II, no. 7

- for an impressive list of types of precious and semi-precious stones. Cf. B. Venkataraman, *op. cit.*, pp. 176-230 for an enumeration and full discussion. The knowledge of precious stones too was extraordinary as they not only mentioned the types, shape and even the faults in the stones. Cf. *South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. II, no. 5, pp. 16-17, for a fuller enumeration.
14. Some of the inscriptions have been damaged and therefore an accurate quantification of gifts given by the king and his sister is difficult to arrive at. B. Venkataraman, *op. cit.* and Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *op. cit.*, have tried to calculate a consolidated figure, which however do not tally. From the tables compiled by B. Venkataraman, a quantity of 36649 *kaḷaṇḷu* 15 *maṇḷāḍi* 1 *kuṇṇi* could be arrived by adding the total figures of Tables 1 to 4 alone, which deals with the pure gold ornaments, objects and vessels given by Rājārāja. By the conversion table provided therein at 4.5 gm to a *kaḷaṇḷu*, the total quantity of gold comes to 164.920 kg. Hultzsch provides the same conversion equivalents (*South Indian Inscriptions* Vol. II, no. 7, p. 8). This estimation did not include the gold included in the jewellery given by him. An abstract (Appendix 14a) provided by the same source, Kundavai donated 8993 *kaḷaṇḷu* of gold vessels and objects (about 40.4685 kg) besides 2343 *kaḷaṇḷus* of gold (about 10.5435 kg) in the form of jewellery, besides 5000 *kaḷaṇḷus* of gold for decorating the *araṇḷu* (hall). These are not final estimations, as records are incomplete due to various reasons. Nevertheless, it provides an insight to the readers about the quantity of precious gifts given to the temple and its images by the king, his sister, members of the king's family and officials.
 15. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, no. 65. It may be recalled here, according to a legend, Rājārāja with the help of Nambi Āndar Nambi retrieved the available hymns of Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar, from the precincts of the Kōyil, the Chidambaram temple and rearranged them into the first seven *Tirumūrais*. This reverence to saints in general and to Sundarar in particular, perhaps led the king to choose the life history of the latter to be the theme of one of the panels in the murals.
 16. *Ibid.*, no. 66. The inscription gives the names of the dancing girls (*talippendīr*), their residential details like their habitation division (*talicchēri*), the street or the specific portion (*śiraku*) of their street and the door number of the individual dancer. This epigraph also stipulates that the right of dancing girls is transferable, as they could nominate another knowledgeable dancer in case of death, migration or incapacitation.
 17. *Ibid.*, no. 4, 5, and 92. There is a difference in the cumulative estimation between the two sources, viz., B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras, 1985) pp. 232 and Appendix 16 and 17 and Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Tanjavur (AD 600-1850)* (Tanjavur, 1994), pp. 267-269. Here too, the king and his officers attained extraordinary accuracy in measuring land and assessing the revenue. Venkayya, in his introduction to the inscriptions of this temple, states that land as small as $1/52,428,800,000$ of a *vēli* was measured and assessed. See *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II p. 6. Such accuracy would be meaningless as measuring a small extant as calculated by Venkayya would be impossible to measure on the ground even using modern gadgets. This calculation is based on the understanding of the term *kīl*, which is taken to be the equivalent of 'by' in fractionation. However, the term has been reinterpreted by Noboru Karashima. See Noboru Karashima, 'Kīl in Tamil Inscriptions: Centralization and Land Survey', Noboru Karashima, *South Indian Society in Transition: Ancient to Medieval Period* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 91-96. See the table arrived at by Hultzsch, while interpreting an inscription recording the extant of land, see *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, no. 5, p. 66, no. 1.
 18. *Ibid.*, no. 70.
 19. *Ibid.*, no. 69.
 20. *Ibid.*, no. 63, 64, 94 and 95.
 21. B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras, 1985) p. 251.
 22. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, no. 37. Several other inscriptions also provide the prevailing exchange rates of other commodities. See *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

Rājarājēśvaram

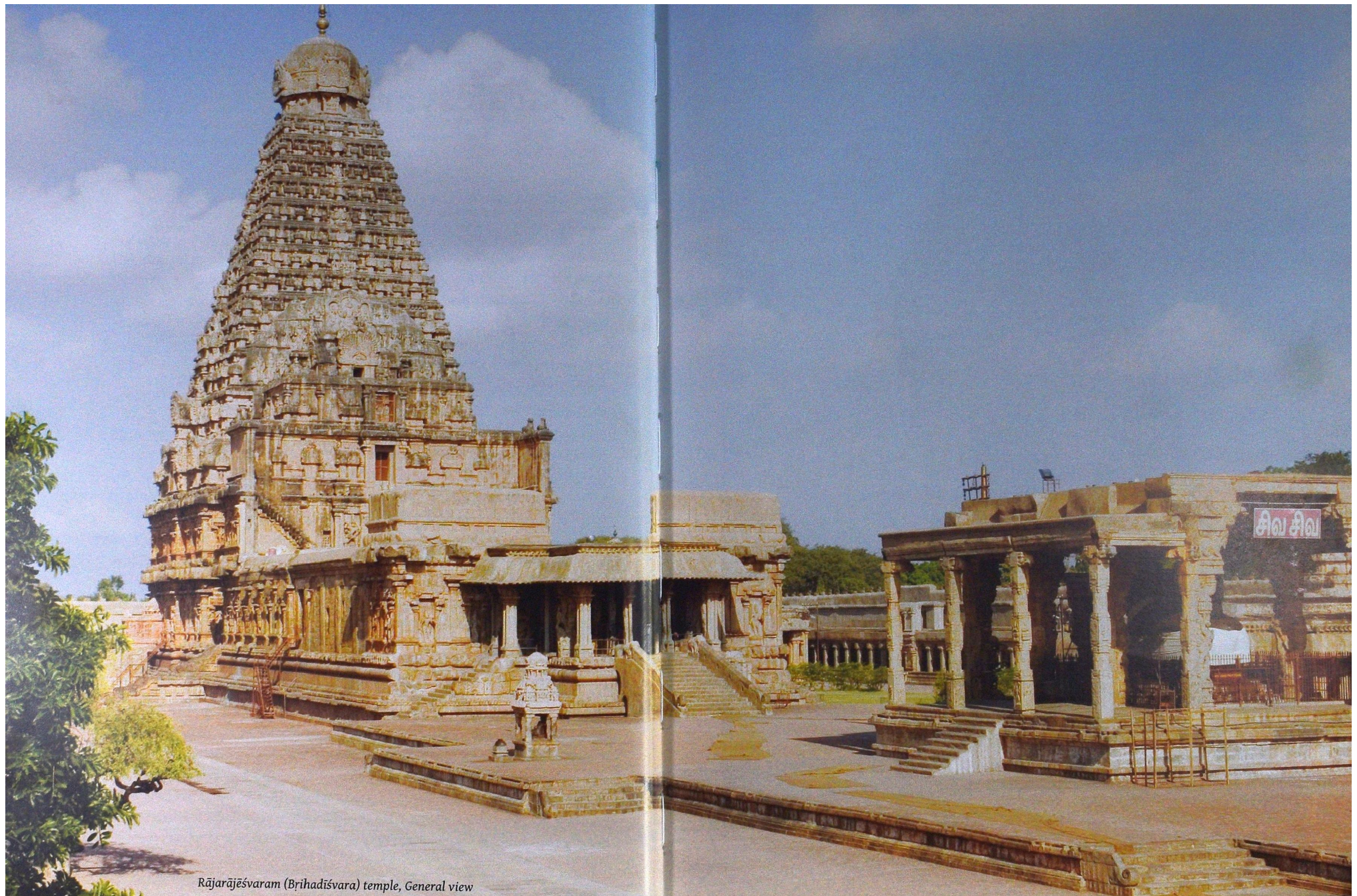
The Chōla rulers and members of their family zealously built many stone temples all over their kingdom. Rājarājēśvaram is the grandest of all Chōla temples. It is still a conjecture, as to how Rājarāja conceived the idea of constructing this magnificent temple and then executed it to perfection. Following this endeavour, a few other royal temples were built of comparable, or even more impressive dimensions.¹ However, Rājarājēśvaram remains magnificent in conception, bold in design and amazingly perfect in execution. The architects of ancient Tamil Nadu scaled the pinnacle of their craft by building this temple.

The Temple

The precise year in which Rājarāja commenced the massive exercise of constructing Rājarājēśvaram is not recorded anywhere. However, on the two hundred and seventy fifth day of the twenty fifth year (AD 1010) of his reign, he specifically donated a copper pot and a sufficient quantity of gold for gilding it, with explicit instructions that the pot to be placed at the summit (*stūpittari*) of the superstructure of the main shrine (*Śrī Vimāna*).² This is an indication of the temple being ready for consecration and worship, if not completion of construction. Considering king's advanced age when he donated the finial, it is likely that he must have hurried the consecration. The temple, particularly the *Śrī Vimāna*, is still incomplete in the strictest sense. Given time, he might have finished it in an even finer manner, but unfortunately, that was not to be.

Source of Inspiration

The foremost thing about the Rājarājēśvaram is its incredible scale and perfect execution. In many aspects, the architect of this temple transgressed the prescriptions of the texts. There was no previous model for Rājarāja to learn from, or to emulate, therefore, the source of inspiration for constructing such a grand temple, as this one, remains a mystery. Ancient architects freely borrowed design elements and motifs from temples built previously, and incorporated them in their edifices alongside certain unique designs of their own. Undoubtedly, this temple assimilated in it several elements that could have been borrowed from other temples. It has been pointed out in a recent study, that several design elements like the transept and the conjoined *ādi*- and second *tala* were borrowed



Rājarājēśvaram (Bṛhadiśvara) temple, General view



Rājarājēśvaram (Bṛihadīśvara) temple, Śrī Vīmāna



Brihadiśvara temple, Gangaikondacholapuram, Śrī Vimāna

from the distant Bhīmēśvara temples at Draksharama and Samarlakota (East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh) or even the nearby Kōraṅgaṇātha temple at Srinivasanallur.³ Similarly, many late Pallava temples are *sāndhāra*. The *bhadra* projections were already in vogue. The *gōpura* over the main entrance had already been introduced in the Shore temple complex, Mahabalipuram and later at Kilaiyur-Melappaluvur. The scheme of *parivārālaya* shrines, with a maximum of eight, was seen in several temples built prior to this one, for example at Tirukkattalai, Narttamalai. Therefore, the significant design elements found in the Rājarājēśvaram had already been tried out in the organic development of temple architecture in Tamil Nadu or elsewhere in the Deccan. However, Rājarāja surpassed all of them by increasing the scale of the entire construction by several multiples, to build this grand edifice.⁴

The Architectural Innovations at Rājarājēśvaram

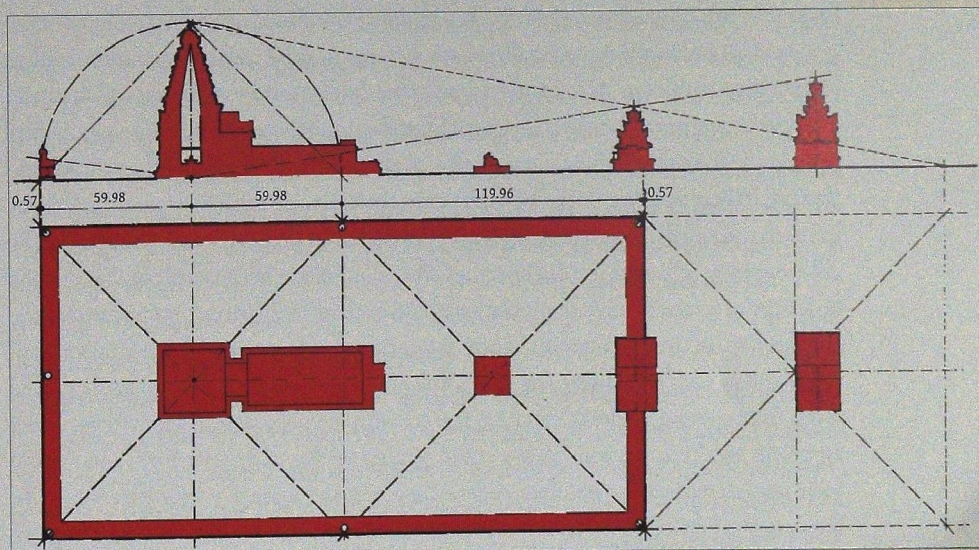
It is difficult to separate the Rājarājēśvaram at Thanjavur and the Br̥hadiśvara at Gangaikondacholapuram (hereafter Gaṅgai) in an architectural study. Two great rulers, Rājarāja and his son Rājendra, built them one after the other. While Rājarāja was inspired on his own to conceptualise his construction, Rājendra had a wealth of experience gained in the construction of Rājarājēśvaram at his disposal. This experience was put to use in the construction of the Gaṅgai temple, which is clearly seen in several changes adopted in the design.

A recent study had brilliantly analysed the achievements in designing the two temples.⁵ According to the study, the units of Rājarājēśvaram are laid out exhibiting a perfect proportional relationship between them. The enclosing wall (*prākāra*) of this temple is laid in an east-west rectangle with sides in the ratio 1:√2. It measures 241.06 m by 121.10 m on the outside.⁶ The rectangle is perfectly laid out. The difference between the lengths on the longer side is just 12 cm over 241 m. This by itself, is a significant achievement particularly in the absence any optical instruments about a thousand years ago. This rectangle was further divided into two exact squares. The corners of the sanctum are diagonally aligned to the rear square. The *līnga* is established exactly at the centre of the rear square. At Gaṅgai, the temple is laid out in a rectangle exteriorly measuring 184.06 m by 109.33 m, and the courtyard within the enclosure gallery is as much as 170.90 by 96.28 m on an average. The ratio being 1: 1.684 and 1: 1.775 respectively, bordering √3, this means that 'this enclosure approaches a rectangle constructed from two equilateral triangles'. There are two unequal lateral projections in the enclosed rectangle, probably added as an afterthought. The rigid rectangle of the Rājarājēśvaram was dispensed with at Gaṅgai.

The care taken by the architect in maintaining the proportions is further reflected in the designs and execution of the elevation of the sanctum of both the temples. The height of Rājarājēśvaram is 59.82 m, almost half the width of the rear square, or one fourth of the length of the complete rectangle. Theoretically, it must be 59.98 to be exactly half the side of the rear square. This means that the rectangle was rotated by 90° on the longitudinal axis to obtain the height. While the difference of 16cm over a height of 59.98 m is negligible, it indicates extraordinary control exercised during construction. It may be noted here that the architect of Rājarājēśvaram did not have any previous experience to rely upon in maintaining these ratios and proportions, while the experience gained at Thanjavur could have been put to use at Gaṅgai. At Gaṅgai, the tower measures 51.04, equalling half of the width of the rectangle.

On the other hand, the architect of the Gaṅgai temple had the experience gained while constructing the Rājarājēśvaram for designing and execution of his enterprise. In spite of the experience obtained at the Thanjavur temple, the architect of the Gaṅgai temple, surprisingly, did not attempt to build a taller edifice, leaving the record to Rājarājēśvaram, as the height of the Gaṅgai temple is shorter by 8.78 m at 51.04 m, when compared to Rājarājēśvaram. This was intentional, because a taller tower was quite possible, as the width of the base was greater than that of Thanjavur.⁷

Once the height of the *vimāna* was designed in proportion to the width of the *prākāra*, the measurements of the other elements of elevation of the receding tiers of the



Rājarājēśvaram, correlation among elements (after Pierre Pichard)

superstructure needed to be fixed accurately, which by itself is a painstaking task. The next step in this Herculean effort, was to execute the calculated proportions to the exact measurements with extreme care. Otherwise, a small error in the final dressing up of the stones at every step would cumulatively add up to upset this fine proportion. It should also be borne in mind that the temple was covered with earth as it came up course by course as a ramp was constructed around it. Therefore, checking and crosschecking the height from the base during construction could not have been possible very easily. There must be an ingenious system put in place to control the level of each course. Another possibility was that the main *vimāna* was built first, and the *prākāra* was laid out according to the required dimension. In either case, the accuracy in execution is striking.

Significant Design Features of the *Garbha-griha*

The *garbha-griha* of the temple is perfectly designed. Leaving aside other features of the design, it is sufficient to focus on the design of the passage around the sanctum, where the murals have been executed. The passage is divided into chambers using doorframes and median doorways with massive sculptures facing them. This effectively breaks the monotony of an otherwise bare and continuous wall of the passage. The openings were intentionally provided for better ventilation and to allow light to come into the passage, so that the murals and sculptures could be viewed in a certain amount of natural light.

This realistic need was accommodated at the cost of two deep-rooted traditions. The usual *kōshṭhas* meant, as a rule, for Dakṣiṇāmūrti (south), Liṅgodbhava (west) and Brahmā (north), were dispensed with, in a significant and bold deviation from tradition.⁸ The cardinal *kōshṭhas* were never dispensed with in any other temple constructed either prior to or after this one. Second, the course of the drain leading to the *praṇāla* to drain the oblation discharge was twisted twice at right angles. In all the temples, the drain generally passes in a straight line along the median axis, through the thickness of the wall and the passage, if there was one. However, in this case, the drain was turned twice at right angles to reach the *praṇāla* located further east of the door, in order to avoid discharging the oblations right below the median openings. This solution was not an ideal one, because the discharge of water, or any other oblation liquid because of the rituals performed for the massive *liṅga* in the sanctum was bound to be of great volume with a good proportion of solids and as such would clog the drain. Any architect would not have so easily moved away from a rigid tradition, and no mason with sound practical knowledge would agree to the construction of a twisted drain, as the chances of choking would increase automatically. Therefore, a decision was taken against a strong tradition like building the cardinal *kōshṭhas* and a common sense application that the drains must be straight with sufficient gradient to accommodate the median openings. The openings not

only provided lighting and ventilation to the passage, but also broke the monotony of the bare and long surface. This was decided upon, because of the decision to embellish the passage with murals. However, these two changes were reversed at the Gaṅgai temple, where the architect went back to tradition. The passage is undivided and the walls are plain. The *pradakṣiṇā-patha* of the Gaṅgai temple was only intended to be a passage and embellishing it with murals or sculptures of *karaṇās* was never premeditated, is quite apparent.

Quarrying and Transportation of Stones

Another important dimension of Rājarājēśvaram is the logistics and techniques of construction. It has been calculated that the total volume of masonry of the temple is about 49,000m³, of which the main shrine is about 26,200m³, the enclosure including the gateway is about 22,500m³, and the remainder is taken up by the Chaṇḍikēśa shrine.⁹ The volume of stone masonry, even after providing for the fillings, is quite substantial. It has been calculated that the average weight of the smallest of the members could be around 400 kg, while the architectural members like the images of *dvāra-pāla*, the doorjambes of the *gōpura*, weigh well-above fifteen tons individually. The total weight of the finished masonry is about 1.5 million tonnes.

The stone used in the construction is migmatitic granite of various shades.¹⁰ The stone is fairly stable and has withstood the test of time because even after thousand years of quarrying the finished surface of the temple has undergone minimal weathering. It is a well-known fact that Thanjavur is situated in the alluvial plains of the River Kaveri with no exposure of granite outcrops. Therefore, the required quantities of stones were quarried, in all probability, from the exposures of granite located in the arc that extends from Tiruverumbūr, a suburb of Tiruchchirappalli to Pudukkottai. Any point in this arc is about 50–70 km from Thanjavur.¹¹ However, it is plausible that several points in the arc were tapped for stones. It is also possible that several other quarries located far away in the empire too were tapped for some special stones. Irrespective of the location of the quarry, the transportation of the quarried stones to the site of construction was indeed a huge exercise, involving enormous energy and complex logistics.

Logistics and Mobilisation of Skilled Workers

The volume of stone required to be quarried must have been at least double the volume of stone used in the finished masonry. Transporting and making them available at the site in an uninterrupted manner must have involved an extremely strenuous, time-consuming task, which required a complex and dedicated logistical network. It was not only stones that were required, an equal quantity of brick, lime and sand for mortar, earth

and other scaffolding materials for the erection of the heavy stones in the proper place too were mobilised for the construction. Procuring and making them available at the site might have involved a highly complicated logistical effort.

Lastly, the finishing of the stone was done in various stages. Several hundred, if not thousands, of stonemasons must have been engaged in the dressing of the stones, sculpting, finishing and polishing. Thus, an enormous quantity of steel chisels was a necessity, and they needed to be sharpened on a daily basis. Therefore, an army of blacksmiths must have prepared and sharpened the chisels. This exercise also involved the extraction of iron from the ore; conversion of iron into steel and then fabricating them into chisels, crowbars, trowels, hammers and other implements. Rājārāja was waging wars all over the kingdom. It is also to be kept in mind that his large army too required sufficient quantities of weaponry made out of high quality steel. Therefore, the blacksmiths of the Chōla period must have been a busy lot and would definitely have played an all-important role in the success of Rājārāja, not only in the construction of the temple, but also in the expansion of his kingdom. Therefore, the construction involved a series of complicated logistical requirements and an efficient network of men and materials, carrying out orders of fabricating, transporting and giving the finishing touches to the dressings, all within a tight schedule.

Some Features of Construction

There is no differential settlement in the entire structure, which in itself is an extraordinary achievement for any architectural endeavour. This temple was obviously built on a solid foundation on an underlying lateritic formation, which is visible over the moat area at a depth of about 3 m from the ground level. However, the details of the foundation cannot be fully fathomed, but it was well laid.

Maintaining the plumb would have been another arduous task since the structure was built course by course, and the risen portion was simultaneously covered with earth. In spite of this, the transference of plumb and level was achieved with near perfect accuracy. The ashlar masonry used, consists of two veneers. The hairline joints between the stones were perfect without any gaps. The two veneers are held together by the sheer tenacity of the mortar of the core filling, and in this case it is of brick set in lime mortar. In order to reduce the span, they employed techniques like inward corbelling (*kadaḷikākaraṇa*), an ingenious technique indeed.

A pertinent question that arises is the means by which they hoisted the heavy members of the *śikhara*, to a height of about 58 m. It is certain that they erected an inclined plane to drag the members up. Another view is that they must have erected a corkscrew-like ramp around the main shrine.¹² Most probably, the structure was covered with earth

both inwards and outwards, which served as a cover for the stability of the structure, as it would have arrested any structural movement while construction was in progress.

The Team

At the outset, it must be mentioned that this project obviously could not have been executed, but for the coordinated efforts of a large force of manpower consisting of architects, masons, and others. However, a dedicated team of individuals must have backed Rājarāja. It is assumed that the chief architect was one Virachōḷaṇ Kuñcharamallaṇ Rājarājapperuntacchaṇ, as his name appears in the inscription providing for the dancing girls mentioned earlier.¹³ The other architects mentioned in the same inscription are Maturāntakaṇ alias Nittavinōtapperumtacchaṇ, Iḷatthi Saḍaiyaṇ alias Gaṇḍarādittapperumtacchaṇ. His general Krishṇaṇ Rāmaṇ undertook the responsibility and possibly the funding for the construction of the *prākāra*, which is almost equal in dimensions to the main temple in volume and efforts. The entire administration of the temple was in the hands of Poykaināḍu Kiḷavaṇ alias Ādityaṇ Sūryavēḷaṇ Tennavaṇ Mūvendavēḷaṇ, the *Śrikāryam* of the temple.¹⁴ *Śrikāryam* was the highest officer entrusted with the responsibility of administration of a temple in the Chōḷa bureaucracy. Rājarāja was guided by his spiritual guru Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita.¹⁵ The chief priest of the temple was Śivāchārya Pāvanappiḍāraṇ.¹⁶ This team of able mentors, visionaries and executors was behind Rājarāja as he scaled monumental heights, both literally and figuratively.

At the forefront of all men and activities, was Rājarāja, backed by his extraordinary ability to conceptualize and execute this great project involving immensely complex logistics, with full determination to fulfil his dream. He has indeed established his name as one of the greatest kings in terms of administrative efficiency and execution. To top it all, his spiritual attainment and devotion to the Supreme Lord of dances, and of the universe Āḍavallāṇ-Naṭarāja, resonates in consonance with every art, architectural and sculptural element of this temple. This meticulous approach is well reflected in the execution and themes of murals as discussed in subsequent chapters.

Notes

1. The list includes the Brīhadiśvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram built within two decades or more by his son Rājēndra, the Airavatēśvara temple at Darasuram (mid-Twelfth Century) in Tamil Nadu and Liṅgarāj temple at Bhubaneswar (mid-Twelfth Century), the Sun temple at Konark (Thirteenth Century), massive in dimensions even in its incomplete state, and the Khāndriya Mahāḍēv at Khajuraho (Eleventh Century).
2. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, No. 1. In this important record Rājarāja clearly mentions the name of the god as Rājarājīśvaramuḍaiyār, i.e. Lord of the temple called Rājarājīśvaram or Rājarājēśvaram. The term *Śrī vimāna* (*śrīvimānattil-kallilē veṭṭuka*) clearly indicate that he refers to the sanctum as *Śrī vimāna* only. On the other hand, the modern scholars equate the massive structure to Dakṣiṇamēru.
3. Pierre Pichard, *Tanjavur Brīhadiśvara: An Architectural Study* (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 35-44.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34. It has been calculated that the Rājārājēśvaram was at least forty times bigger in volume than the normal pre-Chōla temple.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24. The aspects of design discussed below and their comparison with the temple at Gaṅgai are examined in detail in this study. The same is adopted here.
6. There are several publications providing the measurements of the architectural elements of this temple. Unfortunately, there is no correspondence between them. Therefore, the measurements mentioned hereafter follows those published in Pierre Pichard, *op. cit.* It is not to say that the measurements used in this work are accurate. Even in the absence of any explicit reference to their methods adopted in taking measurements, particularly the height of the *vimāna*, the methodology adopted in the study looks more scientific and objective and therefore it is reasonable to expect their measurements are accurate. The author of this work discusses various efforts in graphic documentation of the temple (pp. 16-20).
7. Pierre Pichard, *op. cit.*
8. In fact, the images Dakṣiṇāmūrti and Brahmā did not find a place in the entire *Śrī Vimāna*. There is also an opinion that the median openings were to make the temple a *savatōbhadra* type. See K.R. Srinivasan, 'The Peruvudaiyar (Brihadisvara) Temple: Tanjavur: A Study', in Margabandhu. C. (ed.) *Indian Archaeological Heritage*, K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 525-538, R. Nagaswamy, 'Iconography and Significance of the Brhadiśvara Temple, Thanjavur', in Meister, M.W. (ed.) *Discourses on Siva* (Bombay, 1984), pp. 170-181, and Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Tanjavur (AD 600-1850)* (Tanjavur, 1994, in Tamil), pp. 221-222.
9. Pierre Pichard, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34. The volume and mass mentioned here are from this source. This volume includes the core filling, which in all probability is of brick and lime and the filling within the base.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
11. Several legends are current about the source of the stones. Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Tanjavur (AD 600-1850)* (Tanjavur, 1994 in Tamil), pp. 188-189, quoting an epigraph on a temple near Thanjavur (ARE, 408 of 1902) states that the stones were brought from Killiyur hillock of Nodiyur. Nodiyur is located near Kunnandarkoil in Pudukkottai District. However, it is likely that the stones were quarried from many sources.
12. K.R. Srinivasan, 'The Peruvudaiyar (Brihadisvara) Temple: Tanjavur: A Study', in Margabandhu. C. (ed.) *Indian Archaeological Heritage*, K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 525-538.
13. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol II, No. 67. These names appear at the end of list of service staff attached to the four hundred dancing girls. Other officials involved in the construction or maintenance of the temple affairs have found a place by virtue of their donation and enjoyed the privileges. If they are indeed the chief architects, their name too should be appeared somewhere in the list or they did not donate to the temple.
14. *Ibid.*, No. 38, 40 and 43. He had donated the copper images of Nambi Ārūrar (Sundarar), one of his wife Naṅgai Paravaiyār (Paravai), Tirunāvukkaraiyan (Tirunāvukkarasar), Tiruṅṇanasambandan, the three great Śaiva saints, Periya Perumāl (the king himself), Periya Peumāl Nampirāttiyār Lokamādeviyyār (Lokamādevi, principal queen of Rājārāja), Kṣhētrapāla, Bhairava, Śirutoṇḍanambi (Śirutoṇḍar, another Śaiva servitor), his consort Tiruveṅkātṭunaṅgai and their son Śirāḷadevar. He also donated the jewellery and lands. His donation of images of the three great servitors is significant. So also the images of the king and queen.
15. *Ibid.*, No. 90, mentions his name as the donee of gilt *stūpikkudam* (*stūpi*) for the *dikpāla* shrines. He is mentioned as the 'uḍaiyār Rājārājatēvarin kurukka!', guru of Rājārāja. This inscription records the donations by him and the other *Śivāchārya* Pāvanappiḍāraṇ given to the temple during the rule of Rājārāja and his son Rājēndra.
16. *Ibid.* He is one of the *śivāchāryas* of the temple.

Earlier Mural Traditions

The seminal *Vishṇudharmōttara*, aptly places paintings on a high pedestal when it states that “just as Sumēru is the best of mountains, as Garuḍa is the foremost of the birds, as the King is the chief among men, similarly the best of *chitra* is the most praiseworthy among the fine arts”.¹ Leaving aside the innumerable remains of rock-art spread all over India, the art of painting was practiced through several mediums including ceramics in ancient India. The humble potters, right through this journey created a multitude of rich patterns in varied colours on the ceramics. In many cases, they created patterns imbued with symbolic meanings. Fables told from time immemorial like - 'the fox and the crow' and 'the crow and the deer' too were drawn, as seen on the vases excavated from the site of Lothal.² Since then, the pleasing effects of paintings were well appreciated in ancient India, as elsewhere in the world. An excellent painting in ancient India always invited critical acclaim from connoisseurs, and general appreciation from the masses. There was no lack of patronage for painters which came equally from the rulers and the ruled. Very often, the patron-rulers themselves were learned in the arts, including paintings, and some among them were practitioners too.

Ancient Indian texts on paintings emphasise the aesthetic and auspicious values of the murals (*bhittichitra*) as they are considered as the harbingers of virtuous qualities. All kinds of structures like palaces, noblemen's houses, courtesans' residences, dwellings of the masses, and importantly, religious edifices were tastefully embellished with murals, of which very little has survived. This tradition developed into a cognate and coherent convention with depictions of religious themes in the murals. A symbiotic relationship was shared between the practitioners of religion and painters, which resulted in gains for both. Soon, murals became commonplace in every religious edifice. In tune with this mandate, the Buddhist *chaityas* and *vihāras*, excavated in the Deccan from the second century BC onwards, were vividly painted. Among the remains, the murals of Ajanta are undoubtedly the foremost, and it is needless to recount its splendour as it has been dealt thoroughly in several well-illustrated publications.³ The stoppage of painting activity at Ajanta, perhaps triggered the migration of painters from there to other places, where there was patronage, like the ancient Vātāpi (modern Badami). Patches of extraordinary murals are seen in Cave III, which was excavated by Maṅgalēśa, the Western Chāḷukyan

King in AD 578. These remains too have been well published, so much so the reproductions published therein are much better than the remains seen today.⁴

Murals in Saṅgam and Post- Saṅgam Literature

One should not construe that the logical spread of the mural tradition was from the north to the south. The legacy of mural tradition in Tamil Nadu can be dated back to the early centuries of the Common Era, as indicated by numerous references in the coeval Saṅgam literature. The works of this period often mention the existence of mansions and halls embellished with fine murals. However, such structures did not survive the vagaries of nature, because they were built of perishable materials. Obviously, the murals did not survive too. The walls of mansions and palaces were glistened with *sudai*, (finely ground lime mortar with silky consistency), over which paintings were executed. While describing the structures of the city of Puhār, the celebrated port city of the Chōla country, *Paṭṭiṇappālai* expresses concern over the dust that was generated by the 'swiftly-running wheels' of the chariots spoiling the murals painted on the exterior of the walls.⁵ *Maduraikkāñchi* refers to a Jaina temple (*amaṇarppaḷli*) with painted walls, which were captivating like a polished copper plate.⁶ Similar descriptions occur in *Neṇḍunalvāḍai* about a great palace with its walls painted with creeper designs.⁷ The palaces of the kings had exclusive painted halls called '*chittiramāḍam*'. A Pāṇḍyan king was known as *Chittiramāḍattu-tuṇḷiya Naṇmāraṇ*, meaning Naṇmāraṇ, who died in the '*chittiramāḍam*', a painted pavilion.⁸ This also indirectly indicates the taste and fancy that royalty and nobles had towards paintings, which seems to have always flourished with both the patronage of a wealthy connoisseur and also appealed to the common man.

Kuṇṛampūtaṇār in *Paripāḍal*, a collection of poems by several poets, speaks about the graceful paintings found in the Murukaṇ temple located on the venerated hillock of Tirupparankunram, near Madurai.⁹ Nappaṇṇaṇār provides a graphic description of a *maṇḍapa* (*eluttunilai maṇḍapam*) in the same collection of poems.¹⁰ He sings in praise of the deity and the greatness of his abode at Tirupparankunam. There was gaiety everywhere. Among the visitors, a young couple detoured to visit the *maṇḍapa* embellished with murals. In this context, by the conversation between the hero (*talaivan*) and his beloved (*talaivi*), the poet refers to the themes that were painted on the walls. The themes painted were the positions of the stellar constellations like *Aśvini*, the Sun, etc., Rati and Kāma, and the story of Ahalyā along with sage Gautama and Indra, including a stone representing Ahalyā.

The first representation is interesting. A commentator of this work believes that the ancient Tamils observed the sky and marked the positions of the stellar constellations in public places as paintings, in order to inform the commoner about the sense of time and

the position of stars and planets at that particular period of time.¹¹ The couple were magnetically drawn to the panel depicting Rati and Kāma. The next panel portrays the myth of Indra's lust for Ahalyā, and the consequent anger of her husband, sage Gautama. The choice of these two themes amply indicates that paintings were used to spread the message of the joy of eternal love combined with good virtue and modesty, which was held supreme in ancient Tamil Nadu. The most interesting point here is that even commoners of the ancient period had a taste for observing and analyzing the painted themes. The imbued sense of *akam*, which comprised of the sensuous relationship between young couples, was finely delineated not only in literature, but also in paintings during the Saṅgam age. Any art form that caters to the tastes of the masses and classes never fades away.

Paintings on Other Mediums

In addition to murals, paintings were executed on perishable materials like cloth and leather. Painted curtains called *elīṇi*¹², were used by women as camouflage, while bathing in the river Vaigai. *Neḍunalvāḍai* refers to a wax-treated painted cloth that was tied over the cot.¹³ The theme portrayed was Chandra, the moon, with his favoured wife Rōhiṇi. The woman, who was separated from her lover, bemoans the closeness of Rōhiṇi with Chandra. There is a mention of painted canopies erected over the stage, where Mādhavi performed her maiden dance performance.¹⁴ *Narriṇai* refers to the painting of a sparrow on the eye of the drums (*paṇai*).¹⁵ Painting as an art form lent itself to several mediums and thus was able to survive for long.

The Painter in Literature

Several terms like *kaṇṇuḷ vinaiṇār*¹⁶, *vallōṇ*¹⁷ *ōviyaṇ*¹⁸, and *vittakar*¹⁹ were used in ancient Tamil literature to denote the painter. The paintings themselves were referred to as *ōvam*²⁰, *ōviyam*²¹, *cittiram*.²² The painter or *vittakar* is one who possessed a very fluent and deft hand, so that he could produce works, which entranced the beholder with exuberant colour, and made him feel as if he was watching tapestry on the walls. So much so, *Maṇimēkalai* describes an *Uvavaṇam*, the great garden housing Buddha-pāda was dotted with rare flowers, which is compared to a cloth painted with intricate floral and vegetable motifs. This cloth, obviously, was created with meticulous care by the deft hands of a *vittakar*, a genius painter who paints like real, and a complete professional.²³ Other terms like *vallōṇ*, in addition, meant a skilled artist, while *ōviyaṇ*, simply meant a painter.

However, the context in which the term '*kaṇṇuḷ vinaiṇār*' appears in *Maduraikkāñchi*, one of the ten collections in the *Pattuppāṭṭu* is interesting.²⁴ While describing the city of Madurai, the capital of the Pāṇḍyaṇ king, poet Māṇḍuṭi Marutaṇ describes the busy 'day-

market (*aṅgāḍi*) of the city which was divided into four streets and teeming with various types of people, speaking different languages and professing diverse occupations. There were bangle-makers sawing bangles from shells, bead-makers drilling holes in the beads, goldsmiths creating several types of jewels, the assay masters testing the purity of gold, textile merchants and weavers. There were also painters among them. Unlike other tradesmen, the poet uniquely qualifies painters as the ones with sharp intellect and keen observational skills. They need to dissect threadbare every bit of information by contrasting and comparing it. He had to be a keen observer and analyze the observations. In order to be considered as a good painter, he assimilated and translated what he observed onto a canvas.²⁵ It is very interesting to note that the other craftsmen who comprised mostly of skilled workers, required expertise only to work with their material, while, a very high level of intellect with analytical ability was a prerequisite for a painter in ancient Tamil Nadu.

The experience derived by the painter with keen observation of the perceptible world required to be worked upon in the imagination to produce great works of art. Therefore, the painter was not only a skillful person creating aesthetically pleasing works, but also a spiritually accomplished person. This synergy made him to infuse his creations with a realism, which he attained by his experiences of the perceptible world, and an extraordinary life by communicating with his inner-self, the *ātman*. This is what is exactly implied in *Maṇimēkalai*, when Udayakumāra wonders about the beauty of *Maṇimēkalai*, by equating her with a painting 'conceived in the imagination of the painter', *ōviyaṇ ullattu ulliyattu viyappōṇ*.²⁶

Was painting a product of observation and inner experience only? A treatise on the theory and practice of painting called *Ōviyaccheṇṇūl*²⁷ could have resolved this and many such queries. The reference to this text comes from the epic *Maṇimēkalai*. Unfortunately, nothing is known about this work. Perhaps, it was a collection of conventions and codes on painting. It is compulsory for the courtesans (*parattaiyar*) to acquire the skills of painting. Mādavi, mother of *Maṇimēkalai* and a courtesan *par excellence*, was adept in several arts like dance, drama, singing, playing instruments like *yāl*, flute, composing poems, *pākasāstra*, art of make-up according to the times of the day and seasons of the year, articulation, predictive astrology and other arts and skills, besides, skills in painting and mastery over the well laid-out treatise *Ōviyaccheṇṇūl*. Interestingly, it was a book, which should be read compulsorily too by all those involved in performing arts. In other words, knowledge of this work on painting was imperative for a person to attain a holistic personality as an artist. It is unfortunate that the text has not come down to this age. Indeed, it would have thrown a lot of light on the theory and practice of painting in ancient

Tamil Nadu. It may be recalled here that the *Vishṇudharmōttara*, begins its treatise on painting with an emphatic statement that a person cannot draw or paint without the knowledge of *nāṭya*, dance.

The Saṅgam works give some information on the materials used by the painters. There are ample references to the use of stucco (*sudai*) and the brushes (*tukilikai* and *vaṭṭikai*).²⁸ The brush was very soft as the *pāṭiri* (*Stereospermum colais* [Buchanan-Hamilton ex Dillwyn] *Mabberley*, Sanskrit: *pāṭala*), a soft yellow or white flower. Another epic, *Sīvaka Chintāmaṇi* indicates that painting was the favourite activity of women. For instance, it mentions they dropped the palette for mixing colours, when they heard that *Sīvakaṇ*, the hero was taken to the royal court.²⁹

The art of painting was well admired and beautiful women were equated to the ones in paintings. *Ōviyappāvai*, a term often used to qualify a woman who is as graceful and as beautiful as the one in the paintings.³⁰ The term, *puṇaiyā oviyam*,³¹ literally meaning an undecorated painting or merely a sketch, is often used as a metaphor for describing the condition of women separated from their beloved ones, and sometimes widows too. The aforementioned instances amply prove the influence that the painting traditions of ancient Tamilnadu had on the people. This continuous tradition of painting from the early historical period in Tamilnadu flowered into a great mural tradition during the Pallava period, circa seventh to ninth century AD.

As pointed out earlier, the references from Saṅgam literature proves beyond any doubt that there was a prospering mural tradition, in ancient Tamil Nadu. Unfortunately, no remains representing the tradition have survived the vicissitudes of time, because they were executed on structures built of perishable materials. As of now, the earliest murals to survive are those executed on the Pallava and Pāṇḍya monuments of the seventh-eighth centuries AD. Therefore, a brief account on the mural remains of these dynasties is an important exercise for the better appreciation of the Chōḷa murals, the subject matter of this book.

The Pallava Mural Tradition

Among the Pallava kings, Mahēndravarman I (AD 580-630) and Narasiṃhavarman II Rājasimha (AD 700-728) definitely embellished their structures with murals. Mahēndravarman was a pioneer in initiating the excavation of rock-cut temples in northern Tamil Nadu. He categorically claims himself a '*vichitrachitta*' (curious minded person), in the inscriptions at Mandagappattu cave-temple, in which he records the creation of a temple 'for the trinity Brahmā, Īśvara and Viṣṇu which is 'brickless, timberless, metalless and mortarless, known as *Lakṣhitāyatanam*'.³² He wrote the burlesque play in Sanskrit the *Mattavilāsa-prahasana* and the farce *Bhagavad Ajjuka*. In all

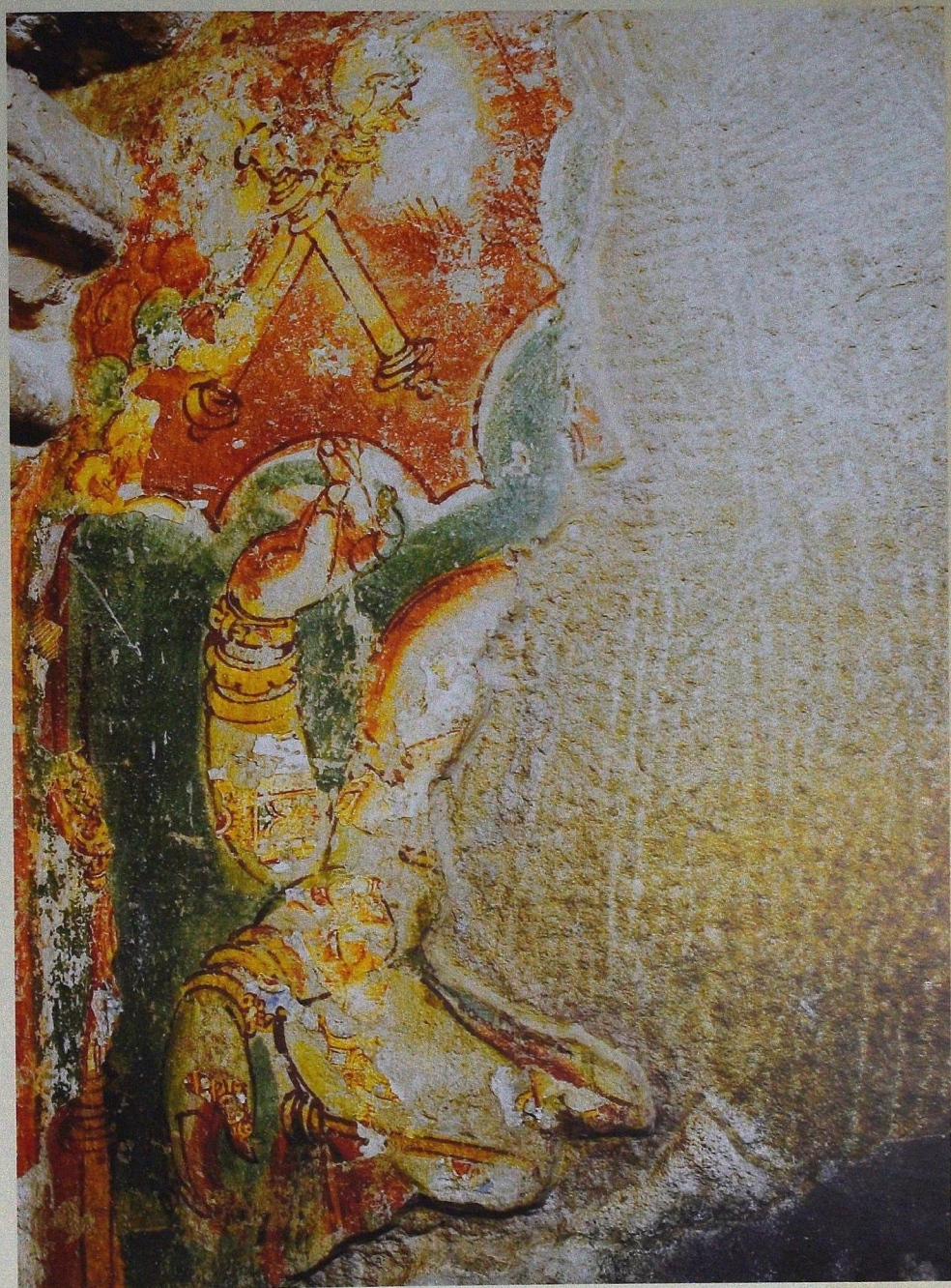
probability, he must have had deft hands at painting too, as indicated by one of his favourite epithets *Citrakārapuli*, a tiger among painters. Narasimhavarman II initiated the construction of 'structural temples' at many places, ushering in the next significant change in the architectural idiom. Murals, along with sculptures, formed an integral element of surface decoration both in the cave and structural temples of the Pallavas. The Pallava cave-temples in all likelihood were extensively embellished with murals, but few fragments of painted plaster can be seen only on the walls of cave-temples at Mamandur, Vallam, etc, and does not merit any detailed description here because of their fragmentary nature.³³ The best examples of the exquisite murals of the Pallavas, preserved on the walls of the Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram and the Tālagiriśvara temple, Panamalai, both built by Rājasimha, are described as follows.³⁴

Kailāsanātha Temple, Kanchipuram

Kailāsanātha temple at Kanchipuram is a gem among many Pallava temples. The exuberant surface treatment with a veritable display of images of gods from the Hindu pantheon integrates well with the pleasing architecture. Unfortunately, the sandstone used for the construction of the temples by Rājasimha at Kanchipuram was very friable and crumbles into particles of sand by the mere touch of a hand. Later, as a deliberate attempt to conceal the effect of weathering, the entire surface was covered with layers of painted stucco, and as a mode of surface decoration. The studies, conducted so far, examined the remains, both murals and painted stucco, without taking a comprehensive view of the remains.³⁵ A preliminary study by the author revealed that they could be classified into four groups based on the technique of execution.³⁶

Group I

These paintings are characterised by a ground consisting of thick plaster. The theme portrayed is predominantly individual deities, particularly Śiva and Brahmā. The representations of the gods are tightly composed in the available rectangular frame. The background, visible over the shoulder of the individual figures, is apportioned off by a motif of cusped arches, running around the head of the deities from one shoulder to another. The background between the head and the arch is invariably filled with green pigment, and the area out of it with red. Another common feature is the depiction of flywhisks (*chauri*), on either side of the figure on the red background. They are shown either in crossed pairs or alone. The colours used follow a set pattern, with red and yellow dominating the figures, while green was used exclusively for the background. A common feature of this group is that thick lines are drawn in brown ochre and the colour pigments were applied so roughly, that they either overflowed the lines or did not fill the intended area. Invariably, these paintings were painted over later on, even though the earlier ones



Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram: Cell 29, Unidentified, Group I, Pallava
Note the unrelated fragments of paintings belonging to Group II



Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram: Cell 26, Dakṣiṇāmūrti, Group I, Pallava
Notice the *gaṇa* belonging to Group II

were in good condition. The over-painting was done invariably by applying a thin layer of lime plaster of the thickness of an eggshell, which are classified as Group II paintings.

The only complete figure among the representatives of this group is drawn in cell 27. The unidentified figure is shown seated on a throne with a massive backrest in *sukhāsana* with the right leg hanging down and placed on a *pāda-piṭha*, while the left is bent and placed on the seat. The front right hand is in *chinmudra*, rear right hand holds a rosary (?). A *kirīṭa* with a typical knob-like projection rests over the head. The figure is well adorned with neck and arm ornaments. There is a single flywhisk, one each on either side. Red predominates other colours, which includes green for the background and shades of brown and white for the precious stones in the ornaments and furniture. The painting was in a good state of preservation when the second layer belonging to Group II was executed over it. The reason for this is not known. The latter layer could not stick to the ground properly, and therefore is preserved in patches over the underlying painting. The theme that was drawn latter is not identifiable from the preserved patches, but they are distinctively different from the one that was executed in the first phase.



Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram: Cell 23, Somāskanda, Pallava, Group II

In cell 26, there is a depiction of Dakṣiṇāmūrti indicated by the *jaṭā-bhāra* and the prominent rosary in the rear left hand.³⁷ There are the flywhisks and unusually, a parasol over the head. This depiction too was painted over, leaving a small patch on the top right corner of the frame of the palimpsest layer. A figure of *gaṇa*, brilliantly modelled with charm, playing cymbals is seen in the patch. Another significant depiction of this group is that of Brahṃā painted in cell 28.³⁸ He is shown with three faces; the front face is drawn in a very beautiful form, a perfect circle. There are a few patches of over-painted layers preserved on the top right portion of the painting. Similar fragmentary paintings of this group are noticed in cells 8, 9, 10, 11, 21 and 29. For the present, it is possible to surmise that the paintings of Group I are the oldest paintings and earlier than the second group, because they are painted directly over them.

Group II

This group is characterised by a technique different from that of Group I paintings. In cells, where there are no paintings of the earlier group, the sketch of the intended theme is drawn in brown ochre over a thick, smoothly finished lime plaster. A layer of very fine lime paste of silky consistency is then applied over the lines. On this layer, the final lines in brown ochre are redrawn faithfully following the original lines. The pigments, mostly yellow, red to bright orange and green, are used, as per the scheme of lines that were sketched. When the paintings of this group are executed over the paintings of Group I, the preparation of ground and drawing of base lines was avoided. Instead, a thin layer of finely ground lime plaster is directly applied over the previous painting. Then, the lines are drawn and pigments applied according to the chosen theme and composition. In the three cells, where this category of paintings are preserved in full, possibly there are no underlying paintings of Group I. The theme portrayed in these cells is invariably Somāskanda. The themes adopted over the Group I paintings are difficult to ascertain as the painted layer of Group II has fallen completely, leaving behind fragments still clinging onto the bottom layer of paintings. The only figure that was preserved over the underlying painting is that of the *gaṇa* in cell no 26.

In cell 23, the sketch of Somāskanda has been done completely. The pigment layer over Umā, Skanda and part of Śiva and Viṣṇu alone is preserved. In the remaining portion, only the underlying sketch is visible, providing a chance to conclude that the overlaid pigmented layer faithfully followed the original sketch. The beauty of Umā's posture is something extraordinary. In cell 41, the line sketch of the Somāskanda figure is partly preserved. Red ochre was filled uniformly over Skanda, and it looks more like an indiscriminate act, rather than any intentional filling. In cell 43, another depiction of Somāskanda panel is partly preserved. Here, Viṣṇu is shown holding a dish with

colourful flowers. It is indeed a different composition of Somāskanda. In the next cell, there is a depiction of *kinnara* and *kinnari* playing on the flute.³⁹

Group III

All the cells are relieved either with a bas-relief sculpture of Somāskanda, or a king and queen. At several points of time, they were covered with layers of coloured stucco. The colours were applied over a coat of very thin, finely ground lime paste, like in Group II paintings. The paintings of this group are marked by the use of a blue pigment, which is rarely seen in early paintings of Tamil Nadu. Blue pigment, perhaps from the natural ultramarine source like azurite, was used in the background to highlight the figures. The range of other pigments used varies from yellow to red, while the bounding lines are in dark brown. Green was used for filling the circular designs in the pedestal and in the jewellery. It is very difficult to ascribe these paintings to any time bracket, but similar bold lines in dark brown were used in some paintings in other cells. The Somāskanda panels were carved without the reliefs of Viṣṇu and Brahmā. While painting over the sculptures, these figures were introduced in the background to make the panel complete. The details are very much similar to other Somāskanda sculptures of the Pallava period.

The Other Group

Of all the paintings in this temple, the paintings belonging to this group are most interesting, but least understood. These are merely sketches in different shades of ochre like red, brown and orange on thick lime plastered ground. In cells 25 and 34, the sketches are drawn in a clustered fashion, one overlapping the other, indicating that they were executed at different times and not conforming to any common theme. It looks as if the painter(s) had tried their hand as a lead up to drawing the main pieces. Cell 9 is important as the sketches are drawn after applying different layers of finely ground lime ground laid one over the other. Cell 17 contains a sketch of a beautiful face of a royal figure, with a disarming smile. Interestingly, this was drawn on the stone surface itself, with another layer of painting done above it. In cell 25, (south-western corner cell), a brilliant face of a royal person and a playful *gaṇā* are shown. The patterns of the rest of the sketches are highly random, done one above the other and of very poor quality. Cell 34 contains the sketch of Mahā-purusha (?) as identified by Sivaramamurti.⁴⁰ This group, if properly analysed, will throw significant light on the painting activity at this temple.

Date of Paintings

One may wonder whether the paintings in this temple belong to a particular school of art, viz., the Pallava, or was executed at different points of time by painters belonging to different schools. Based on the covering of a later Chōla inscription by a layer of painting, it was concluded that the paintings were done in three stages, once in the Pallava period



Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram: Cell 17, Royal figure, Pallava, Other

itself, the next in the late twelfth century and the last in the Vijayanagara period when Kumāra Kampaṇṇa, the noted general who conquered Kanchipuram and visited this temple.⁴¹ However, dating the paintings individually is a difficult task. More research and keen observations may throw some light on these remains.

Tālagiriśvara Temple, Panamalai

Rājasimha built the Tālagiriśvara temple atop a hillock overlooking a massive irrigation tank at Panamalai. The temple has a main sanctum and three attached shrines. Fragments of murals are preserved on the walls of the northern sanctum, the only remaining representations of a once well-decorated temple. It depicts the great *saṃhāra tāṇḍava* of Śiva with all the eight arms in movement with one of the left hands stretched vertically upwards, which many have taken to be the *lalāṭatilaka* posture.⁴² There is a sculpture of Śiva in the identical *saṃhāra tāṇḍava* posture in the Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram. On the main wall of the shrine, Dēvī (Pārvati) is witnessing this magnificent performance. The posture of Dēvī, is extremely relaxed while observing the *tāṇḍava*, recalling the depiction of women in similar postures in the Amaravati sculptures, and in the Ajanta paintings too. Similarly, this posture was also adopted by the Chōḷa painters, while depicting Dēvī witnessing the *ānanda tāṇḍava* of Śiva. The colours in this fragment are vibrant. Interestingly, azurite blue was used as a filler. Red, used for tinting the matted hair of Śiva, is brilliant. The shading of Dēvī's face in mild green, resulting in the desired result, brings volume to the cheeks and nose. The lines are rhythmically flowing, definitely the work of a master painter. The use of cusped arches in the background indicates that this painting maybe coeval with Group I of the Kailāsanātha temple, Kanchipuram and therefore belongs to the earliest phase of Pallava paintings.

Though frugally preserved, the remains of Pallava murals seen at the abovementioned temples strongly reflect the momentum in mural activity. This could not have been possible but for the strong patronage of the rulers. Second, the quality of lines and treatment of colours indicates a very high standard of the painters. The technique is completely different to that of Ajanta, clearly indicating that the Ajantan painters had a very limited role to play here.

The Pāṇḍyan Mural Tradition

The Pāṇḍyās under Kaṇḍuṅḡon re-established their power at Madurai overthrowing the Kaḷabhra clan, sometime in the sixth century AD. They proved a match for the Pallavas both in politics and in patronising the excavation of cave-temples and even a monolith. Their cave-temples too were painted. Though not extensive, the murals at Sittannavasal speak volumes about the direct patronage of the kings and the extraordinary skills of the painters of Pāṇḍyan country.



Tālagiriśvara temple, Panamalai: Dēvi, Pallava

Sittannavasal was a celebrated Jaina centre for several centuries. At the summit, of the hillock is a natural cavern with seventeen polished rock surfaces dressed similar to a bed with a pillow. It was the abode of Jaina hermits (*siddha*) for several centuries, where they rested and performed austerities like *kayōtsarga* and *sallēkhana*. At the foothill is a cave-temple known as Arivar kōil, dedicated to the *arhats*. An accurate interpretation of an inscription of the ninth century AD engraved on the rock by the side of the cave-temple indicates that the cave-temple was definitely enlarged to its present form and was decorated with murals during the reign of Pāṇḍya king Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha also called Avanipaśēkhara (AD 815-862) by a Jaina Ācharya Iḷaṇ-Gautamaṇ, from Madurai.⁴³ The cave-temple has paintings on the ceiling of the *garbha-griha*, *ardha-maṇḍapa* and facade pillars and undersurface of the beams.

The painting on the *garbha-griha* depicts a canopy of a carpet pattern over the images. The 'subject matter of the geometrical pattern is the *dharmachakra* in which pairs of Gautama-Gaṇadharas are grouped in places formed by meandering bands and superimposed by a pair of lions'. The subject matter is *dharmōpadēsa* of the Tīrthaṅkara and the interpretation of the *divyadhvani* that emanated from the Tīrthaṅkara by the two Gautama-Gaṇadharas, during the *samavasāraṇa* of the Jīna.⁴⁴ More importantly, the *ardha-maṇḍapa* depicts in a grand manner the scene of the *samavasāraṇa*, one of the *kaṭikhabhūmis* that a *bhavya* (a good soul) had to cross to attain salvation. *Samavasāraṇa* is a pond full of lotuses, birds, animals, all enjoying the warmth of the cool water. Through this idyllic pond, the *bhavyas* travel through to the next region and so on to hear the discourse of the Lord in the structure at the centre of the *samavasāraṇa*. The description of the pond, particularly that of the animals and the flowers, given by T.N. Ramachandran, is as beautiful as the paintings themselves.⁴⁵ The choice of the colour scheme, free flow of lines in all the objects like lotuses, birds, fish, elephants, buffalos described, above all, the extraordinary modelling of the *bhavyas* whose 'pose and sweetness of countenance are indeed charming' prove the highest skills of the painter and add to the tranquillity of the sacred pond.

If the depiction of *samavasāraṇa* is a masterpiece of mellowed art, the figures on the upper cubical part of the pillars and the undersurface of the beams are an exhibition of intricate royal art. The northern pillar has a 'graceful figure of a dancing *apsara*-maiden'. Even in its fragmentary and very bleak state of preservation, the danseuse looks gorgeous. Her left arm is stretched in *lāta-hasta*, her right arm is bent in front of her bosom with her palm presenting *paṭāka* with the head tilted slightly, possibly she is performing either the eighteenth *karaṇā* the *alāta* or the twenty-fifth, the *lātavṛschika*.⁴⁶ On the corresponding face of the southern pillar, there is a painting of another nymph, possibly



Jaina Rock-cut temple, Sittannavasal: Samavasāraṇa, Early Pāṇḍya



Jaina Rock-cut temple, Sittannavasal: View of the painted façade pillar, Early Pāṇḍya

executing the fortieth *karaṇā*, *Bhujāṅgachitaka*. On another face of the southern pillar, are depictions of the Pāṇḍyan king Avanipaśēkhara Śrīvallaba leading his queen to see the Madurai Ācharya, Ilaṅ-Gautaman. The ascetic was painted in between the king and the queen. The headgear of the king is elaborately drawn. Interestingly, this painting was vandalised immediately after its completion by a vandal who scribbled his name in the characters of that time. Today, this is a part of the epigraphical record. On the under surface of the beam, there is a brilliantly drawn figure of *haṁsa* with a flowing tail.

The Sittannavasal murals occupy a separate niche in the evolution of Indian paintings. Often, the subdued use of colours and free flow of soft lines of the figures particularly in the *samavasāraṇa* panel made many to comment that the tradition created at Ajanta was still lingering here. The murals at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka too exhibit similar subdued and soft treatment strengthening this argument. Is it true? It may not be. No doubt, Sittannavasal follows the Ajanta tradition in tone and tenor. Art historians rooting for this view had conveniently forgotten that the theme Jaina *samavasāraṇa* might be the reason to adopt such a mellowed approach in use of colour and gentle lines. A scientist, with a keen eye for

art, considers Sittannavasal murals to be of high craftsmanship, and remarks; "It must, however, be admitted that the art of painting and excellence of the painter is closely linked with craftsmanship. While the art of Ajanta is truly great, its craftsmanship is very poor indeed".⁴⁷ Indeed a bold statement.

Other Centres

The remains of the rich mural tradition prior to the Chōla period are not restricted to the places mentioned earlier. Places like Armamalai, Tirumalaipuram, Tirunandikara, Narttamalai are some of the other places where patchy remains have been found. Armamalai is a natural cavern habited by Jaina ascetics, where patches depicting creeper designs have been noticed. These fragments may belong to late the eighth or early ninth century AD. In a patch, creepers with tender leaves, *hamisas*, a fragment of possibly *dīkpālas*, (of which Agni's figure alone is discernable), and a pond are painted. These paintings were of Jaina affiliation and possibly were patronised by the Gaṅga-Pallavas, if not by the Rāshtrakūṭas.⁴⁸ More Pāṇḍya paintings were noticed at Triumalaipuram, where the rock-cut cave-temple was decorated with murals, and Kilavalavu, Anamalai, Kilakuilkudi, all Jaina centres with sculptures painted over. Sivaramamurti speaks about a Mahāpursha painting at Tirunandikara, located in the Nāñjil Nāḍu with possible Chēra affiliation.⁴⁹ No doubt, such a strong tradition of mural paintings prior to the Chōla period, obviously influenced Rājarāja's decision to embellish the passage around the sanctum with murals.

Notes

1. *Vishṇudharmōttara*, III, 43:39, as translated by C. Sivaramamurti, *Chitrasūtra of the Vishṇudharmōttara* (Delhi, 1979), p. 197.
2. S.R. Rao, *Lothal-A Harappan Town (1955-62)*, Vol. II, *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*, No. 78 (New Delhi, 1985).
3. A. Ghosh, *Ajanta murals - An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour* (New Delhi, 1967) for a comprehensive bibliography, see Amina Okada, *Ajanta* (New Delhi, 1996).
4. C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Paintings* (New Delhi, 1968), p. 41, S. Kramrisch, *A Survey of Painting in the Deccan* (Hyderabad, 1937), S. Kramrisch, 'Paintings at Bādāmi', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. IV. No. 1, pp. 57-61, C. Sivaramamurti, 'Western Chālūkyā Paintings at Bādāmi', *Lalit Kala*, Vol. V (1959), pp. 49-58. J.N. Ahivasi, a well-known painter and his assistants did the documentation of murals at Bādāmi and Sittannavasal for Lalit Kala Akademi under the supervision of Karl Khandalavala and K. Hebbar. 'These copies are the most accurate copies of the Bādāmi paintings yet made and are at present on loan to National Museum of India, New Delhi. The work was undertaken by the Akademi to ensure faithful record of remains on the site as it is feared that further deterioration is likely to take place in the years to come'. See Editor's note in *Lalit Kala*, Vol. V (1959), p. 58.
5. *Paṭṭiṇappālai*, 45-50.
6. *Maduraikkāñchi*, 484-487.
7. *Nedunālvāḍai*, 108-113.
8. *Puraṇāṇūru*, 59.
9. *Paripāḍal*, 18:27-28,

10. *Paripādai* 19: 48-53. See commentary by Po. Ve. Somasundaranar, *Paripādai* (Madras, 1975), p. 306-07.
11. *Ibid.* The depiction of constellations is very interesting.
12. *Silappatikāram: Kaḍalaḍukātai*, 168-170.
13. *Neḍunalvāḍai*, 157-163. See commentary by Po. Ve. Somasundaranar, *Pattuppattu*, Vol II (Madras, 1980), pp. 43-44. The commentator is of the opinion that the figures of Chandra and Rōhiṇi were depicted in the painted in their human form.
14. *Silappatikāram*, 3: 106-111.
15. *Narṇṇai*, 58: 2-4.
16. *Maduraikkāñchi*, 518. See commentary by Po. Ve. Somasundaranar, *Pattuppattu*, Vol II (Madras, 1980), pp. 132-34.
17. *Narṇṇai*, 146, *Paripādai*, 21: 27-28.
18. *Maṇimēkalai*, 5:7.
19. *Ibid.*, 19: 5-6.
20. *Patirrupattu*, 61: 3, *Ahanānūru*, 5: 20.
21. *Silappatikāram: Araṅkēṇṇukātai*, 107-111, *Kaḍalaḍukāthai*, 168-169.
22. *Maṇimēkalai*, 3: 167-168.
23. *Ibid.*, 19: 5-6.
24. *Maduraikkāñchi*, 518. See commentary by Po. Ve. Somasundaranar, *Pattuppattu*, Vol II (Madras, 1980), pp. 132-34.
25. The Sanskrit texts, including the *Chitrasūtra* of Vishṇudharmōttara, expect a painter to have intuitive ability and technical skill.
26. *Maṇimēkalai*, 5: 7. See commentary by U. Ve. Saminathaiyar, *Maṇimēkalai* (Madras, 1949), p. 55.
27. *Ibid.*, 2: 31-32.
28. *Sudai* is a very finely ground paste of lime and sand, which was in use for a very long time in Tamil Nadu. See *Maṇimēkalai* 3: 130-32, refers to use of *sudai*, a fine paste of lime, *Maṇimēkalai* 4: 57 refers to *vaṭṭikai*, circular palette, *Narṇṇai* 118 refers to *tukilikai*, a soft brush.
29. *Sivākachintāmaṇi: Kunamālaiyār Ilambakam* 257.
30. This is a general term coined by Kambar in his *Kambarāmāyanam*.
31. This term was used in *Maṇimēkalai* and other works. See *Maṇimēkalai* 16: 130-13, 22: 88 *Neḍunalvāḍai* l. 147.
32. K.R. Srinivasan, *Cave-temples of the Pallavas* (New Delhi, 1964), p. 34.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 54-58.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 58. See S.T. Baskaran, 'Paintings of Tondaimandalam', *Journal of Tamil Studies*, Vol. 6 (1980), pp. 58-68. These paintings were first noticed by Jouveau-Dubreuil, 'Pallava Painting', *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. LXX (1923), p. 45.
35. C. Sivaramamurti, 'Paintings from the Kailasanatha Temple', *Journal of Oriental Research*, Vol. XI, Part II, p. 73. Also *South Indian Paintings*, (New Delhi, 1968), pp. 61-66, S.T. Baskaran, *op. cit.*, R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), pp. 82-83.
36. P.S. Sriraman, 'Kāñchi Kailāsanāthar kōyil Pallava ōviyaṅkaḷ - Oru mīlpārvai' in *Cittiramadam: Tamilaka suvaroviyangal kurittakatturaiikal*, Ed. Barathiputtiran (Chennai, 2010), pp. 44-53.
37. This was noticed by S.T. Baskaran, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
38. This painting of Brahmā was noticed both by S.T. Baskaran, *op. cit.*, p. 61 and R. Nagaswamy, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
39. These paintings were noticed by all and are illustrated as the examples of Pallava School.
40. C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Paintings* (New Delhi, 1968), p. 63.
41. R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), p. 81.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 81. C. Sivaramamurti identified the pose as *lalāṭatilaka*. See C. Sivaramamurti, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
43. Earlier, this cave temple was attributed to the Pallava king Mahēndravarmān I based on the simple architectural features and the fact that Mahēndravarmān was a Jaina early in his life besides his extensive interest in painting as indicated by one of his epithet *cittirakārapuli*. For a full description, its paintings, sculptures and inscriptions, see T.N. Ramachandran, 'Cave Temple and Paintings of

Sittanavasal', *Lalit Kala*, Vol.7 (1960), pp. 30-54. See footnote on p. 32 for all significant works on this edifice.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-48.

46. C. Sivaramamurti, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

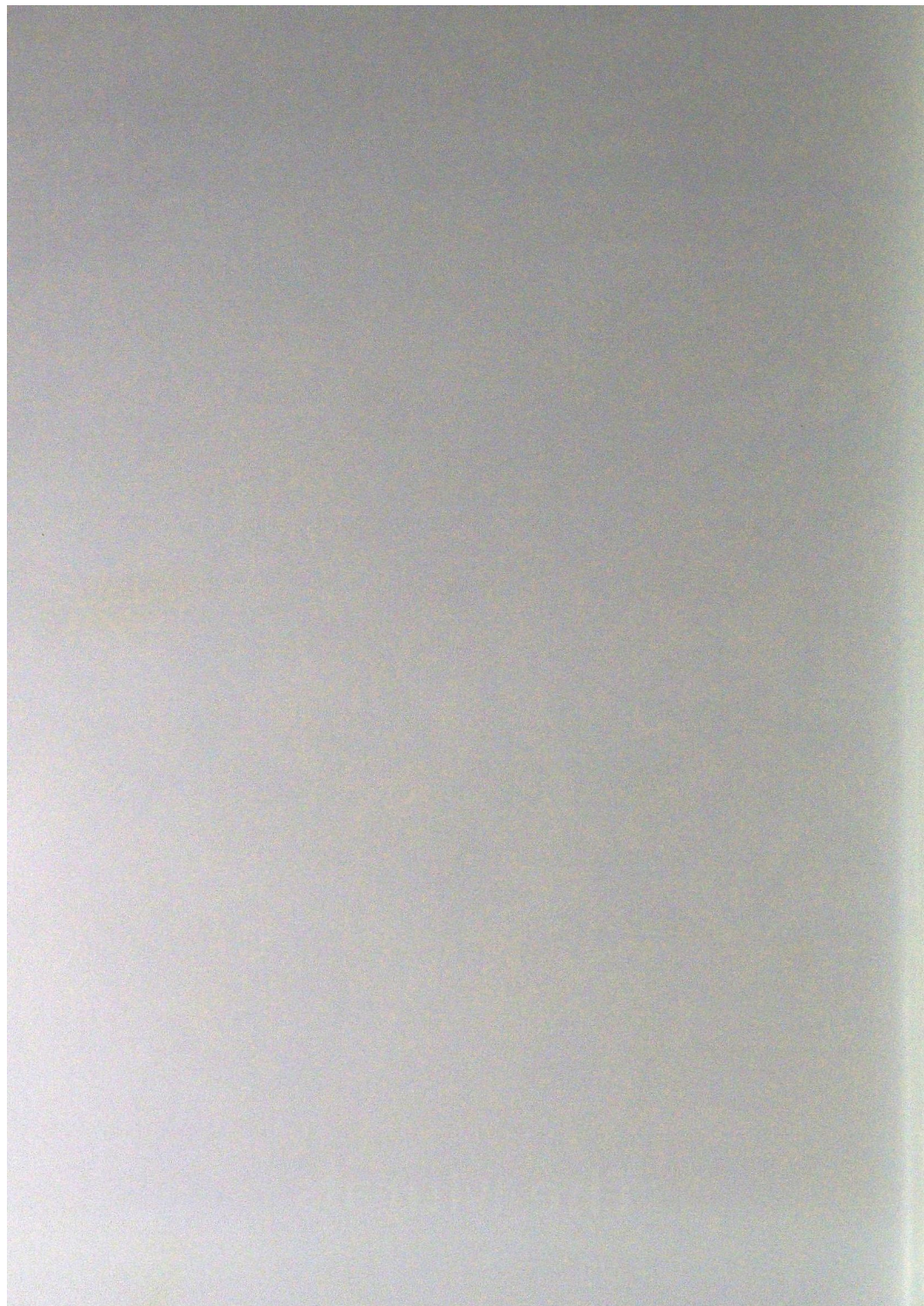
47. These observations are of S. Paramasivan as referred to in T.N. Ramachandran, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

48. Edward Montgomery and S.T. Baskaran, 'The Armamalai Paintings', *Lalit Kala*, Vol. 16 (1974), pp. 22-27, S.T. Baskaran, 'Paintings of Tondaimandalam', *Journal of Tamil Studies* Vol. 6 (1980), pp. 58-68.

49. C. Sivaramamurti, *op. cit.*, p. 68.



The Murals



The Murals

Their Discovery and Documentation

During the early decades of the twentieth century, there was enthusiastic interest for exploring monuments for the remains of mural paintings, particularly in the Deccan. The motivation came from several well-illustrated publications on the Ajanta murals. The publication of treatises on ancient Indian paintings further stoked interest. Consequently, remains of murals of Early Chālukyan, Pallava and Pāṇḍyan schools were discovered respectively at Badami, Kanchipuram and Sittannavasal respectively, indicating the spread of mural traditions beyond the western Indian caves. Taking this cue, Prof. S.K. Govindaswami of Annamalai University, Chidambaram examined the *pradakṣiṇā-patha* of Rājarājēśvaram in the 'dim religious light of a small oil lamp' during 1930 for Chōla period murals, but only succeeded to 'get a mere glimpse of the existence of a few patches of paintings'. However, on his next visit to the temple on 9 April 1931, he was better equipped with a 'baby pertromax'. He reported in *The Hindu*:

'...but paintings of an undoubtedly very late and degenerate age, whose linear contortions and chromatic extravagances shattered in a moment all my wonderful dreams of discovering there the best and the only example of the art of Chola mural paintings. Still I chose a part of the western wall for close inspection and found the painted plastering there cracked all over and threatening to fall down. A gentle touch and the whole mass crumbled down exposing underneath a fine series of frescoes palpitating with the life of other days'.¹

The Chōla murals of this temple were discovered in the dark passage possibly on 9 April, 1931.² The paintings that he described as of an 'undoubtedly very late and degenerate age' is the Nāyaka period murals, while the one he discovered below it belongs to the Chōla period. Further extract from the report is worthy of note as it was his spontaneous understanding about the significance of the discovery, and it aptly reflected his eminent scholarship.

'...The discovery of these paintings is of great importance to the history of South Indian art. Hitherto the Pallavas held exclusively the palm for mural paintings in the Tamil country. The Cholas may now be believed to divide the honours equally with the Pallavas not only in South Indian architecture and sculpture but also in South Indian painting. For I have little doubt judging from the excellence of the drawings, the colour scheme and the fresco technique that these paintings belong to the best period of Chola rule, to the

glorious reign of Raja Raja the Great, and contemporary with the building of the Great Temple of Tanjore'.³

Within a few months, in June 1931, he again wrote an extensive article delineating the significance of the painting, titled "A New Link in Indian Art" in *The Hindu Illustrated Weekly*, the magazine edition of same newspaper.⁴ He examined various facets of the painting. He noticed the absence of a clayey layer and opines that the painting was executed in a 'combination of the tempera and fresco' technique. He goes on to appreciate the intricacy of the execution of figures and the brilliant use of lines and colours to infuse a sense of volume to the figures by the painter. The themes, he rightly concluded, are Śaivite and Śiva in his several manifestations, particularly the depiction of Naṭarāja in the "Golden Hall" at Chidambaram. He was able to identify the portrayal of the Story of Sundarar. He curiously identified a dark-complexioned figure as that of Rājarāja. He was on the dot when he dated the paintings to be contemporaneous with the construction of the temple. He concluded that the discovery dispelled the misconception that there was discontinuity in the painting tradition. The discovery disproved the contention that 'the pictorial art was largely practiced only when Buddhism was in its halcyon days that with the forward march of Hinduism the plant of Indian pictorial art had pinned and perished'. Another interesting aspect of this article is the reproduction of several scenes from the Story of Sundarar panel like the cooking scene (captioned 'a busy domestic scene'), Chēramān riding his horse (*A Royal Rider*), Śiva's production of the original document (*A panel illustrating the Story of Sundaramoorti Nayanar*) and the divine dancers (*The Divine Dancers*). Following his report of the discovery in *The Hindu*, Govindaswami published two articles.⁵



'A busy domestic scene', (From the archives of *The Hindu*)

The Complete Exposition and Documentation of the Murals

The discovery of the amazing remains of Chōla murals infused an urge among the officers of the Archaeological Survey of India to bring the temple under the complete control of the Survey, which was hitherto managed by the the Senior Prince of the erstwhile Marātha ruling family of Thanjavur as hereditary trustee.⁶ Successive Director Generals of the Survey soon deputed S. Paramasivan, then a chemical curator with the Government Museum, Madras to examine the paintings and attend to their chemical conservation immediately. Later on, Paramasivan joined the Survey in a permanent capacity as its Assistant Superintending Chemist with specific responsibility of preserving the Chōla murals and possibility of exposing it further. The Archaeological Survey of India photo-documented the paintings for the first time.

As mentioned earlier, the earliest graphic documentation of the murals appeared in *The Hindu Illustrated Weekly* as part of Govindaswami's article. These are manual reproductions in black and white, possibly prepared by tracing and then coloured by a deft hand. This was followed by line sketches prepared by C. Sivaramamurti, who had the practice of preparation of his own line illustration⁷, which are indeed a marvellous reproduction. The flow of lines is as good as that of the Chōla artists. Sometime in 1950's, the Lalit Kala Academy undertook a project to prepare accurate reproductions of the murals to 'ensure a faithful record of remains on the site as it is feared that further deterioration is likely to take place in the years to come'. Though Badami and Sittannavasal were covered under this project, the murals of this temple were left out. No comprehensive efforts were undertaken in this direction possibly due to the time and



'A panel illustrating the Story of Sundaramoorti Nayanar' and 'A Royal Rider', (From the archives of *The Hindu*)



The Divine Dancers (From the archives of The Hindu)

energy involved in producing manual reproductions vis-a-vis the emerging trends in colour photography, which made colour reproduction much easier.

Once the murals of this temple were brought to light, their importance realised and beauty admired, art historians and photographers began to pay due attention to them. Among all the doyens, it was T.N. Ramachandran, who appreciated the beauty of the murals most. He also understood the necessity for an accurate photographic documentation of the paintings as a prerequisite for realising the excellence of Chōla painters. He commissioned a professional photographer C. Nachiappan to execute the work.⁸ This was indeed a decision with vision at a point of time when colour photography was in delicately nascent stages, the cost of production was prohibitively high and processing facilities were available only in leading cities, definitely not in the small town of Thanjavur. Though it could not be seen in print immediately, it was published recently in book form by the photographer.⁹ He writes in the introduction:

“...Sri T.N. Ramachandran, Joint Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India wanted these to be photographed; he also had plans to write a book on the heritage of Thanjavur.

The efforts by the photographers of the Archaeological Survey of India were not successful, [sic] because it was not an easy task to cover a wall of 8 ft × 14 ft with a clearance in front of only about 7-8 ft. The results of their efforts gave a distorted version of the paintings. Then Sri. T.N.Ramachandran approached me and asked if I could undertake the work. I agreed.

The surface of the walls, on which the painting was found, was divided into a number of squares; each square was photographed separately and put together without the fine dividing line being seen in the final transparencies. The camera was mounted on a certain level on the ladder so that the focus would not be affected when photographing the squares at the level; a sensor fixed by me also would make sure that the focusing was proper. It was quite a tedious and painstaking job, but that was the only way it could be done, if the entire painting were to be photographed without distortions. I had set up a processing laboratory there itself at the exhibition room to check the work at every step. I used to go to Madras frequently to process the pictures and make sure that I could proceed further. It took me a month to complete the work. I used a Linhof camera 5" × 4".

There was no scanning facility those days. It had to be done with only a graphic arts camera and had to be sent to Saraswathy Press in Calcutta; but the technicians there had exposed the transparency too long under powerful light and burnt the films. Fortunately, I had a set of transparencies for my own record, which I have been preserving carefully. Meanwhile Sri Ramachandran had completed his work on the paints and his manuscript was being processed for publication. But, unfortunately, when the publication was half-way through, he passed away. All these happened almost 50 years ago.

Meanwhile I decided to publish a book with the photographs of the painting I had zealously preserved all these years. The modern technology has made it possible to get excellent reproductions. I myself sat along with the compositor technician and did the colour corrections, wherever the colours might have faded."

It is rather unfortunate that the set given to the Archaeological Survey of India was lost permanently and the documentation was altogether forgotten. The images published in the recent book are not impressive because of the condition of the original transparencies due to passage of time. However welcome the publication may be, there are some glaring shortcomings in the publication like inclusion of a photograph that was not part of any murals of South India.

The very location, the dark *pradakshinā-patha* of the sanctum sanctorum, is a nightmare for any photographer. The passage severely lacked the two fundamental requirements of photography, viz., sufficient distance between the subject and the camera and availability of natural lighting. A panel measures *circa* 3.05 m × 4.57 m with offsets on either side. The available space of 2.03m between the walls is just sufficient to cover an area of about two feet by a foot and half with a standard wide-angle lens. Loss of perspective was another serious concern. Therefore, except for the efforts described

earlier, all other photographers focussed on the bright and well preserved areas of the murals. If the short distance between the walls posed problems, lack of lighting was not helpful either. The dependence on artificial lights is absolute which affected the colour rendition. Obviously, the results are sketchy.

The only procedure to achieve this was to photograph the whole panel in as many frames as required and then montaging them into one frame as was done before. It was indeed a challenging task to execute. While the fundamental technical difficulties in photographing the panel faced by Nachiappan remained the same even now, the advent of digital photography made the montaging a bit easy.

Notes

1. S.K. Govindaswami, 'Thousand Years Old Chola Frescos', *The Hindu*, April 11, 1931.
2. Prof. S.K. Govindaswami was a young lecturer of History in the Annamalai University, Chidambaram. He writes: 'it was only yesterday, I found it convenient...'. The date line of the paper states that he wrote to the paper under date 10th instant. Therefore, the date of discovery can be safely deduced as 9th April 1931.
3. *Ibid*.
4. S.K. Govindaswami, 'A New Link in Indian Art', *The Hindu Illustrated Weekly*, June 7, 1931.
5. S.K. Govindaswami, 'The Frescos of the Brihadisvara Temple at Tanjore', *Journal of Annamalai University*, Vol. II (1933), S.K. Govindaswami, 'Cola Paintings', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, I (1933).
6. L.K. Srinivasan, 'Archaeological Conservation and Resurrection of the Brihadisvara temple, Thanjavur', Nagaraja Rao, M.S. (ed.) *Kusumāñjali, New Interpretation of Indian Art and Culture*, C. Sivaramamurthi Commemoration Volume (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 129-135.
7. C. Sivaramamurti, 'Some Frescos of the Cholas', *Triveni*, Vol. 6 (1933), pp. 227-234.
8. C. Nachiappan (Koviloor Swamy), *Magnificent Mural Paintings: Sittannavasal, Panamalai, Tanjavur Early Chola Paintings, Karana Sculptures of Tamilnadu* (Chennai, 2005), Introduction.
9. *Ibid*.

The Murals

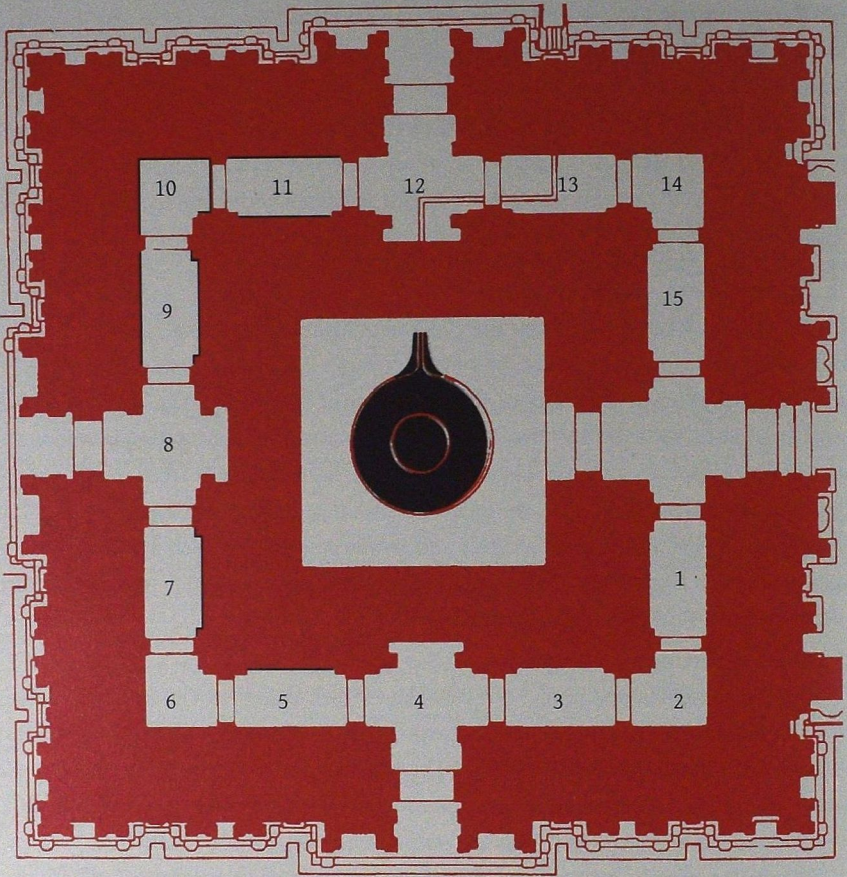
Their Themes and Contents

The murals of the Chōla period of this temple pose unique problems because of their large size and location in the dark and narrow *pradakṣhiṇā-patha*. A major portion of the depiction is located well above the eyelevel of visitors. The space between the two walls of the passage is insufficient for viewers to move back and examine all the figures within a panel, as a whole. Therefore, the correlation of the figures and motifs within the panel becomes a difficult exercise. However, the present documentation provides an opportunity to look at every panel more closely with the obvious aid of technology, which negated the constraints posed by the narrow *pradakṣhiṇā-patha*. The exercise was fruitful leading to many interesting discoveries and reinterpretations, which are described as follows. Prior to a complete analysis of the contents of the murals, it is imperative to describe the physical setting of the murals.

The Physical Settings of the Murals

The circumambulatory passage is divided into fifteen chambers. The sixteenth on the east is the passage to the sanctum. There are three median chambers along the other axes of the sanctum, four corner chambers and eight chambers in between the median and corner chambers. The division into chambers was achieved by way of sills, jambs with conjoined offsets and segmental walls above a particular height, all done with the purpose to enhance the visual quality of the depictions. The median chambers had effectively broken the monotony of a bare continuous passage, besides letting air and light into it in the required quantity.

Each chamber has two surfaces for executing the murals - the outer surface of the inner wall, and the inner surface of the outer wall of the *vimāna*. The outer surface of the inner wall is cantoned with a series of offsets at either end to create a large recessed space in the middle. The recessed surface, where the themes are painted, measures 3.05m × 4.57m and the offsets 0.15 m, 0.30 m and 0.15 m. The other surface, the inner surface of the outer wall of the *vimāna*, is flat and larger, without any offsets and terminating in the uprights. The space between the walls is 2.03 m. Both the surfaces of the passage are painted. As a rule, only one theme was painted per wall. The theme of the painting on the inner wall, is continued on the offsets and perhaps on the door uprights too. The segmented wall, measuring 2.03 m × 1.32 m, over either doorframe too was utilized to



Plan of the sanctum with location of the Chōla murals
(Numbers in the middle denotes the chamber number)

Chamber 5 Sage teaching his Royal disciples'

Chamber 7 Story of Sundarar

Chamber 9 Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at the Kōyil

Chamber 9 Rājarāja worshipping liṅga

Chamber 10 Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti

Chamber 11 Śiva as Tripurāntaka

Chamber 11 Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti



Rājarājēśvaram, view of the pradakshinā-patha

continue the depiction. The chambers in the corners are embellished with a single theme, spreading over the segmented walls too. The chambers aligned to the median doors and the ceilings too must have been relieved with murals.

Similarly, there are faint patches of murals clinging here and there on the plain walls above the sculptures depicting *karaṇas* of Bharatā's *Naṭya Sāstra*, along the passage located above the one running around the sanctum. These are not documented as the pigment layer has almost vanished, leaving behind a weak outline of the figures. Hence not included in the study.

Themes and Locations of Exposed Chōla Murals

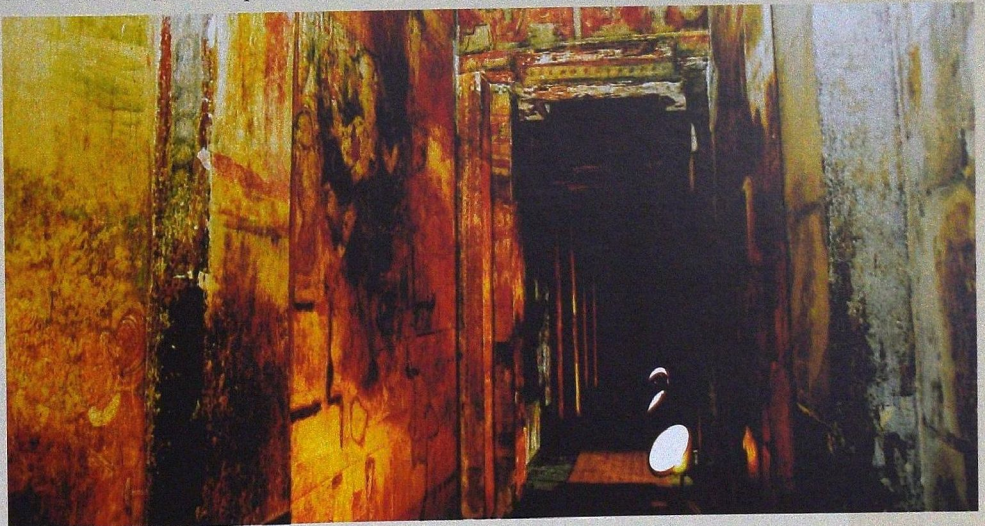
As one goes around the passage in the usual clockwise direction, Chambers 1 to 3 have Nāyaka murals. Chamber 4, aligned to the southern median opening, contains a massive sculpture of a seated form of Śiva. In Chamber 5, the first panel of the Chōla period depicts a sage teaching his royal disciples'. In Chamber 7, there is a grand depiction of the Story of Sundarar. Sundarar was the 'servitor of all servitors' (*aḍiyārku aḍiyēn*), a close and dear friend (*aṇukkat tonḍan*) of Śiva who took birth in the mortal world to attain ultimate salvation (*jīvan mukti*). This panel is well preserved with vibrant colours and firm lines. The depictions in this panel are simple. Therefore, the theme can be accurately identified without any difficulty.

Crossing Chamber 8, aligned to the western median door opening, the visitor enters Chamber 9, a chamber with a panel of the Chōla period on either wall. On the outer surface of the inner wall of the sanctum, there is a gigantic depiction of Naṭarāja (*Āḍavallān*) at the shrine of Tillai (Chidambaram), and Rājarāja along with his queens and others worship him. Because of its fine state of preservation, the panel was interpreted correctly. The well-preserved portions have been illustrated as examples of the Chōla School of painting.

On the opposite wall, there is a heavily-damaged panel. It nevertheless depicts two significant events which happened during the life of the king, and the painter had recorded them with his brush. In the upper portion of the panel, Rājarāja is shown worshipping the *liṅga* of the temple before its consecration in the sanctum. The depiction of a grand scene of an exposition by a seer, with the entire court of Rājarāja listening to it in great awe and wonder, in the lower portion was missed by those who have studied the painting so far. Next in line is Chamber 10, the north-western corner chamber. In this chamber, there is a portrayal of Śiva's marriage with Pārvaṭī, witnessed by gods, devotees and women. This panel too is not well preserved. On the offsets around this chamber are depictions of royal women and the popularly identified figures of Rājarāja and his preceptor Karuvūr Dēvar. The latter identification will be subjected to scrutiny when the depiction in the chamber comes up for discussion.

In the following chamber, Chamber 11, the depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka and Rāvaṇā's wanton adventure of Kailāsa, have been painted on the inner and outer walls of the *vimāna* respectively. The former is a masterpiece of this gallery and is very well preserved, aiding easy identification and enabling one to appreciate the mastery of Chōla painters. The latter panel is severely damaged, but the figures are discernable. Chambers 12, 13, 14 and 15 and all other chambers that have not been included earlier, contain Nāyaka murals in various stages of preservation. A list of themes exposed so far is given in a table for ready reckoning.

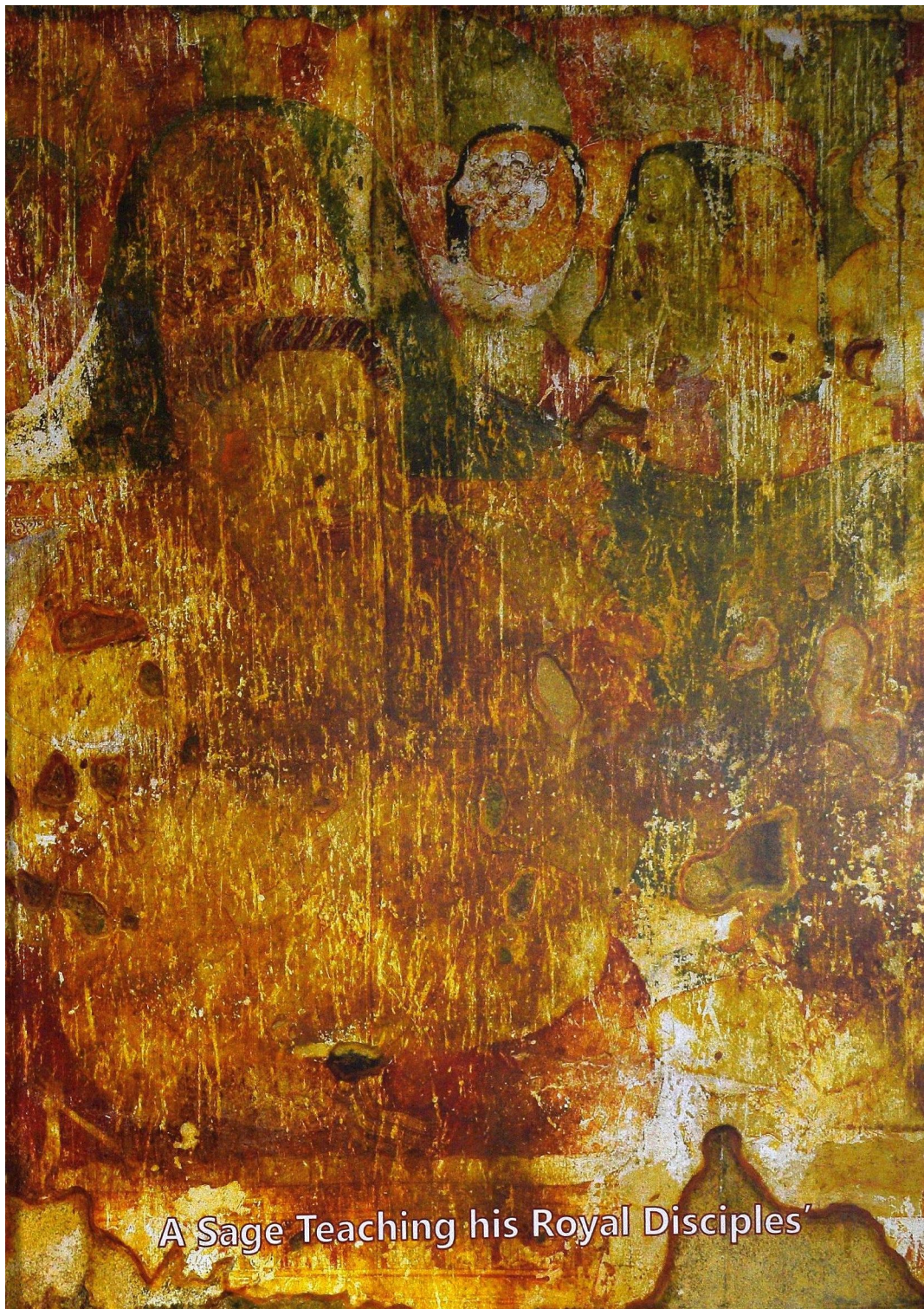
Whose authority and sanction was required to select and finalise the themes and contents of the paintings is a fascinating query. It could be the painter, or Rājarāja or it may be a joint effort, but the final authority undoubtedly was the king himself. Rājarāja was a very devout and staunch Śaivite and therefore the themes and contents of these murals are, without any doubt, Śaivite. Even in the absence of any recorded evidence, it is safe to assume that the painter enjoyed freedom to choose the form and format of the contents of each panel, but the authority of Rājarāja as far the selection of themes must have been supreme. Therefore, the murals are the result of the persona of both the patron and the painter, which is very apparent in the murals. While Rājarāja's memory was inerasably etched in the annals of history, the Chōla painter, like most brethren of his fraternity of this ancient land, has completely vanished into oblivion without any record mentioning him. The themes and contents of the panels are described as follows in clockwise order, in the sequence visitors encounter.



Rājarājēśvaram, view of the pradakṣhīṇā-patha

Table 1: Themes Depicted in the Murals of Rājarājēśvaram,

Location Chamber Number	Wall	Theme identified earlier	Theme identified in this study	Title given to the panel in this study
1 to 3	Nāyaka murals			
4	Chamber aligned to the median door			
5	Inner	Dakṣiṇāmūrti	A sage teaching his royal disciple in a forest, admired by Śiva, Saptamātrikas	Sage teaching his royal disciples'
	Outer	Nāyaka mural		
6	Corner Chamber	Nāyaka mural		
7	Inner	Events happened in the life of Sundarar	Events happened in the life of Sundarar	Story of Sundarar
	Outer	Nāyaka murals		
8	Chamber aligned to the median door			
9	Inner	Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at Chidambaram	Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at Chidambaram	Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at 'the Kōyil',
	Outer	Rājarāja worshipping the liṅga	Rājarāja worshipping the liṅga and a sage expounding a great religious theme	Rājarāja worshipping the liṅga,
10	Corner chamber	Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti	Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti	Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti
11	Inner	Śiva as Tripurāntaka	Śiva as Tripurāntaka	Śiva as Tripurāntaka
	Outer	Rāvaṇa shaking Kailāsa	Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahāmūrti	Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti
12	Chamber aligned to the median door			
13 to 15	Nāyaka murals			



A Sage Teaching his Royal Disciples'

Śiva

Brāhmī

Maheśvari

Kaumāri (?)

Vaiṣṇavi (?)

Vārahi

Taṭāka

The sacred
banyan tree

Aṭhairava

The sacred hillock

Saintly disciples

The Sage

Royal disciples'



1. A Sage Teaching his Royal Disciples'

In Chamber 4, the first Chōla panel of the passage is seen on the outer surface of the inner wall (*antara-bhitti*) of the sanctum. The palimpsest Nāyaka layer, which was covering the Chōla layer, has been removed for about three quarters of the panel from the top to uncover the Chōla layer. In the remaining quarter, the Nāyaka layer is still preserved. The Nāyaka layer depicts Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrthi in the usual manner. He is seated on boulders in a cave with his typical ensemble of *rishis*. The treatment of the figures is very interesting, particularly the peculiar headgear, beard and moustache of the sages, all drawn with an obvious Islamic influence.

The Chōla layer has been identified variously as the depiction of Dakṣiṇāmūrthi¹, the great sage Agastya² and the coronation of Rājarāja in the Tillai forest.³ Those advocating the portrayal of Dakṣiṇāmūrthi were strongly influenced by two typical features, like the direction in which the panel faces, which is south and the prominent depiction of a banyan tree with “chirping birds”. However, the other attributes of the standard portrayal of Dakṣiṇāmūrthi are missing in the depiction. A closer examination of the documentation revealed an entirely different perspective, which is described as follows.

The Sage

At the eyelevel is the depiction of a sage-like figure faintly visible in a dull tone and very weak lines. In comparison to other figures of the panel, he was drawn in magnified proportion occupying a large area to indicate his relative eminence and centrality to the depiction. In the available light, it is very difficult to determine the details of this figure, because of the weak lines and dull tone. However, this documentation provided an opportunity for scrutinising the painting.

The sage-figure is short, pot bellied and chubby. He is adorned with an extraordinarily jewelled *jaṭā-makuṭa* with a *dhatura* (Tamil: *Ūmattam*, *Angel's Trumpet*, *Brugmansia suaveolens*) flower, which is set brilliantly in the elaborate hairdo. A long striped cloth is twisted and tied around the head in the lower margin of this hairdo. He has a very long and drooping moustache, merging with a long and thick grey beard. Eyebrows are silken-white due to his advanced age. And the open eyes look to the left. The mouth is wide open and the teeth are clearly visible, suggesting that he was uttering some wise words. He is shown with only two arms. His right hand is kept in a relaxed manner on the kneecap of the bent and raised right leg, while the left hand is held like the *kaṭaka hasta*, to indicate his being busy with teaching. He is wearing a single strand of large white beads around his neck besides a simple, ring type armlet (*bāhuvalaya*). His upper garment is of a single ply cloth, twisted and flowing across the body from left to right. His body is yellow in hue.



Sage teaching his royal disciples', full view



Sage teaching his royal disciples', detail showing the Sage, his disciples' and the hillock



Sage teaching his royal disciples', detail showing the sacred banyan tree and Śiva with Sapta-mātṛikās



Sage teaching his royal disciples', the sacred banyan tree



Sage teaching his royal disciples', Śiva with Sapta-mātrikās

He is seated in a relaxed manner on a red-cushioned *pīṭha* with a backrest. The *pīṭha* has motifs of *simhas* in small, square recessed niches, to indicate his status as a royal *guru*. His bulky body rests on a massive oval-shaped cushion, covered with a white cloth with either extremities decorated in red. The cushion is placed between his body and the backrest. He is shown in an unconventional sitting posture, with his right leg bent, raised and placed on the cushion and the left leg too is bent and kept flat. A short *triśūla*, perhaps the symbol of his cult, is placed near his right leg on the red cushion.

To his left, three persons are seated on the ground. It is very difficult to identify their gender, as the details above the torso have been discoloured and erased to a large extent. On close scrutiny of the documentation, it is possible to identify the first person, seated immediately to the left of the sage as a male, while the other two are women because of the exuberant ornaments adorning their neck. All the three figures wear ornamental crowns (*kiriṭa*), indicating their royal status. Their right leg is bent and kept flat, while the left leg is bent and placed. Their right hand is held in the same pose, *kaṭaka hasta*, like the left hand of the sage, as if they are repeating what the sage has uttered. All three of them are shown carrying a palm-leaf in their left hand. In addition, there is a bunch of palm-leaves kept in front of them in the traditional cross-armed palm-leaf holds. By displacing a single leaf from each stack, the painter intends to indicate that the leaves from the stack are being removed as and when a particular subject comes up for discussion. There is an ornate pitcher with a spout, which is placed by the side of the palm-leaf holds.

To the right of the sage are two male persons, who are saintly in appearance. One of them is old, while the other is much younger. The older person, of red complexion, is seated in a normal sitting posture away from the sage. Unlike others, his hands are not held in a responsive posture as his right arm is placed on the knee. He is looking intently at the sage. The younger person is green complexioned with a divine expression and in a spellbound mood. His hair is arranged in *jaṭā-bandha*, possibly bedecked with flowers. Since the lines are not clear, it is very difficult to ascertain the posture of the arms. Both wear a curling upper garment. They too have individual palm-leaf holds and pitchers with spouts. Strangely, a white cat is shown at the far end. From the above description, it is very clear that the sage is propagating knowledge (*vidya*) to his five disciples', three of whom are royal pupils and the other two are saints. Before venturing into the interpretation of the scene in full, the location of this sermon and extraordinary display of animal behaviour should be described.

The Location of the Sermon – The Hill

The location where this sermon transpires, is delightfully portrayed. The sage is seated in a huge cavern. The other crevices are occupied by ascetics and different types of

wild animals. Some wild animals roam freely over the hillock and the some are resting in the shade. To the far right is a wild white boar, snarling and charging with its snout. Next to it is a deer, seated in an unconcerned manner. Some in the herd of elephants are youthful and playful, amply exhibiting their energy. One of them is breaking the branch of a tree, yet another carries the broken branch of the tree up the hill. It is not an easy task for the behemoth to carry a large log up the hill. The effort is telling as it has secured the branch tightly by coiling its trunk around it. So was its determination, in running up the hill. In effect, it makes one to wonder about the extraordinary efforts and unimaginable strength of the elephant. Sadly, the whole depiction are very small and the pigments have lost their lustre.

A pair of lions is occupying a crevice, overlooking the valley and obviously waiting for their hunt. Fiery and alert cheetahs are seated upright as their cub is playing around in the boulders. Closer to the cheetahs is a cobra, with its outspread hood, also showing its prowess. The depictions of the wild beyond this point become mythical with the depiction of two *sardulas*, seated with long, upright and twisted tails. Further, a hunter, followed by a boar is entering the wild with a bow and arrow. He is wearing a peculiar high cap with a



The crevices of the hillock with ascetics

bow-like decoration attached to it. A wild bear completes the list of animals inhabiting the hillock.

Seated in the crevices, displaying no fear for the wild animals are three pairs of ascetics, deeply engrossed in philosophical discussions. Amongst them, one pair is shown like saints who have monkey-like features and the body of a male is shown with a prominent genital. In another crevice, there are two male sages, with matted locks of hair, engaged in profound conversation with a palm-leaf for reference. In the third are two women ascetics with folded hands and looking towards the Sage.

The exotic variety of vegetation growing in these tough conditions seems to sprout and jut out from the small patches of nutrient soil formed within the spaces between the boulders. The painter seems to suggest that this was in fact a hillock located in the real world, rather than a celestial one.

The Sacred Banyan Tree

In spite of its ferocious inhabitants, the hillock is venerated because of a sacred banyan tree. Three divine devotees to the right and another to the left with deep respect and reverence, are worshipping the banyan tree grown luxuriously and covering the entire summit. The sacredness is further manifested by the *pokkanam*, the bag containing the *basma*, *danḍa* and a bunch of peacock feathers, all hanging from a branch of the tree. It enables one to visualize in the mind the radiating presence of Śiva, even though he has not been shown *per se*, as he sat under a banyan tree, as the master of knowledge, to propagate *jñana* by his mere silence. The banyan tree has been faithfully drawn with areal roots and typical berries. A forceful depiction of an eight-armed Bhairava, accompanied by a fierce dog complete the portrayal at that level. A devotee kneels below, singing to the accompaniment of cymbals.

The Animals on the Tree and the Cobra

The depiction of the banyan tree with its animal inhabitants is perhaps the one of the best of all compositions. The sacredness of the tree did not hold back the painter from portraying it with a vivid moment in the life of the animals perched on the branches of the tree.

A cobra, spreading its hood, slowly climbs up the trunk from the bottom, lashing its tongue like a flame, looking for prey from those perched on the tree. Sensing the danger by the entry of the cobra, the inhabitants of the tree are clearly stirred up. Seated on the branches on the top of the tree, alert birds are the first to react to the threat. A bird or two has just taken off, even though the hissing cobra is far below. Others, being away from it, are watching and waiting for an opportune moment to fly away. Peacocks, three in number, are seated as a pair and a single, and have sensed the threat as well. They are

unable to see the cobra because of their long necks and therefore have to bend down to gaze at the threat. There are a pair of owls seated motionless near the cobra, with almost no perception of the threat. Perhaps, they were deliberately depicted in such a manner, as the painter may have wanted to suggest that it was daytime and the nocturnal birds that owls are, were in fact fast asleep with absolutely no clue about the arrival of the snake. A squirrel too is shown very engrossed in picking berries from the tree.

The Four Monkeys

The high skill of the painter is well reflected whilst illustrating different reactions of the four monkeys at the entry of the cobra. Of the four, the one that was positioned on the branch behind the snake, is quietly slipping away and about to jump to safety. The fear is evident on its face. The mane of this frightened fellow is erect like nails. Another monkey, directly in the line of attack, is running away, with abject fear showing on its face. The raised eyebrows of the animal are shown with strong lines to reveal fear, which is also very visible in the eyes as well. Anxious to escape from the cobra, the monkey places its foreleg on a vertical aerial root rather than on a horizontal branch as it is not sure of its steps. Worry writ large on its face, the third monkey, perched further behind the cobra, away from its direct sight, is quietly observing the movement



The monkeys

of the predator, deciding on the timing of the obvious evasive action. Seated on a branch in line of sight of the predator, the fourth monkey, who is far away from the cobra, is totally unaware of the threat because everything is happening behind his back. The painter has depicted this animal with minimal movement. The raised ear indicates that it is aware of the threat by reflex, but not its intensity. The whole depiction indicates that the painter was a master observer of animal behaviour and seems to have studied their body language very intently to use it for this depiction. He has used every motif, the strong lines of the face, and the body posture to suggest the anxiety of the animals at the unwarranted threat.

Śiva and Sapta-mātṛikās

The depictions on the top of the panel cover about the one third of the panel and are not at eyelevel. Standing on the floor, the visitor will have to focus his vision telescopically on this part of the panel to view the white-complexioned figures of Śiva and Pārvati. There is an appreciable gap between them, prompting many to opine, that it may be a depiction of Somāskanda. However, current documentation has been very helpful in solving the riddle. In fact, the painter imagines that the session of *guru-śishya* interaction going on below was so intense and imbued with the essence of knowledge, that it had attracted the attention of Śiva in the company of Sapta-mātṛikās. Though an unusual depiction, it is an



Śiva with Brahmī, Mahēśvari, Kaumārī (?)

interesting fact. In their heavenly abode, Śiva and the mothers are seated by the side of a pond (*taṭāka*). The details of the pond are barely noticeable due to the damaged layer of paint. Nevertheless, the pond is full of lotuses, lilies and also fresh water. The water is not a place of safety, since a crocodile infests it. A devotee has just entered the pure water as the legs of a person can be seen. The portrayal is reminiscent of the great depiction of the *taṭāka* of the *Samavasāraṇa* at Sittannavasal. By the side of the pond, Śiva and the *mātrikās* are seated on a common *pīṭha*. It is Śiva, preceding the mothers, instead of customary Gaṇēśa. In addition, it is not the conventional Śiva as Vīrabhadra but the regular form of Śiva is shown. Of the seven, only the first five *mātrikās* – Brāhmī, Mahēśvarī, Kaumārī (?), Vaiṣṇavī(?), Varāhī, – could be accommodated in the available space while Indrāṇi and Chāmuṇḍa are, in all probability, painted on the perpendicular segmental wall, where the Nāyaka layer is yet to be removed. The posture of these gods, including Śiva, is atypical. They are shown seated in the usual *vīrāsana* with their respective attributes in the static upper arms, while the lower arms are not in the usual *abhaya* and *varada* gestures. Instead, the lower left hand is resting on the left thigh and the right hand is held in *suchi hasta*, the arm being held horizontally. The head is turned towards the left and tilted upwards. The movement suggested by the hand and the head posture is that they are not only listening and acknowledging the transfer of knowledge that is taking place below between the sage and his disciples, but also approving and appreciating the same.

A Sage or a Royal Guru?

It is obvious from the description provided earlier that the sage and his disciples have no resemblance to the standard depictions of Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūṛthi. The differences are many. The sage-like figure is not Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūṛthi, simply because there are no four arms with the usual attributes. The third eye is not depicted in the forehead. Above all, Dakṣiṇāmūṛthi does not espouse the doctrines concerned with the ultimate *jñāna* by uttering mere words, but on the contrary, his discourse is eloquent in silence (*maunam vyākhyānam*). The sage depicted here is clearly uttering something as his lips are parted and the teeth are visible. The customary divine sages are absent. His disciples on the left are of royal status. Therefore, the identification of this panel of Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūṛthi is incorrect. The identification of the sage as Agastya too can be discounted on several grounds. The stone representations of Agastya as a *kōshṭha dēvata* are common in an early Chōla temple. In such cases, he is shown either standing or seated in *vīrāsana* on a *padma-pīṭha*. He holds a rosary between his thumb and the index finger of his right hand, which is in *vyākhyāna-mudra*, while the left hand holds a palm leaf or *kamaṇḍalu*. All these features are absent here. However, the body form is similar in both this representation and that of

Agastya in stone sculptures. Agastya was already deified in the literature and sculpture. Therefore, identifying the sage as Agastya is not correct.

In spite of the similarities in modelling the figure, the painter clearly suggests that the sage is an enlightened mortal. Since the depiction here is dynamic and the sage and three royal disciples were looking at each other with reciprocal body postures, it is concluded that the panel depicts the theme of a sage, who may be a royal guru, teaching his royal disciples, with the help of palm-leaves. The two saintly figures too are his pupils, but they are not participating in the transmission of knowledge (*jñāna*) directly, because of the innate divine qualities already present in them. The sage was indeed a spring of ultimate knowledge as suggested by the sacred banyan tree. The transmission of *vidyā* between the sage and his disciples must have been very significant and extraordinary. So much so, the *mātrikās*, with Śiva are appreciative and approving the diffusion. The gestures of their right hand clearly imply this meaning. Perhaps, the painter had intentionally weaned away from the convention, of depicting the *mātrikās*, with Śiva in static postures as he wanted to portray that the lord himself was appreciating this transmission of knowledge.

The portrayal of the *mātrikās*, with Śiva in this context is significant. T. A. Gopinatha Rao, a noted authority on Hindu iconography, quoting *Varāha-purāṇa*, asserts that “the killing of the demon by Śiva and the *mātrikās* represents *Ātma-vidyā* or spiritual wisdom as warring against *andhakāra*, the darkness of ignorance: *ētat-te sarvam-ākhyātām ātma-vidyāmṛitam*. The spirit of *vidyā*, represented by Śiva, fights with *Andhakāsura*, the darkness of *avidyā*. The more this is attempted to be attacked by *vidyā*, the more does it tend to increase for a time; this fact is represented by the multiplication of the figures of *Andhakāsura*. Unless the eight evil qualities, *kāma*, *krōdha*, *lōbha*, *mada*, *mōha*, *mātsarya*, *paśūnya* and *asūya* are completely brought under the control of *vidyā* and kept under restraint, it can never succeed in putting down *andhakāra*”.⁴ Keeping this significant role of the *mātrikās* in removing the ignorance in mind, the painter had drawn them along with Śiva in dynamic fashion to indicate that the sage is in the process of removing the *avidyā* of his students.

Identification of the Sage and his Disciples

Among the three royal disciples seated to the left of the sage, the one shown nearest to the sage, in all probability, is a king. The other two are women, and therefore queens judging from their ornamentation (*bhushaṇa*) and attire. The posture of the sage, like the direction of his sight, postures of his body and arms, clearly indicates that he is teaching the royal disciples. The disciples too reciprocate with similar gestures. All the royal paraphernalia, associated with the sage, like the *simhāsana* with the backrest and the cushion, undoubtedly indicate that he is a royal guru.



Bhairava and a divine devotee

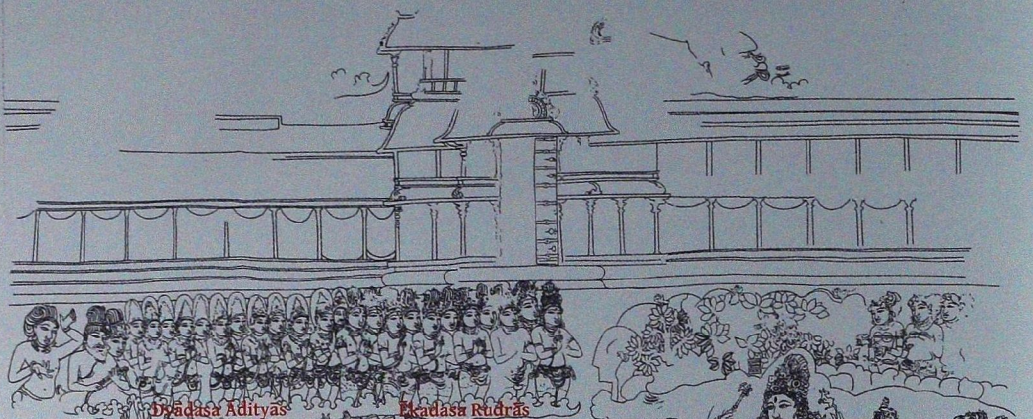
While discussing the iconography and significance of this temple, it was argued that the Śaiva-gurus with the title '*paṇḍita*' indeed served as the teachers of the Chōla kings.⁹ It was also suggested that the Śaiva *sidhānta* principles stress the need for a guru for ultimate salvation, important for the king who was almost nearing the end of his life.⁶ According to the Vaidika and Śaiva Siddhānta streams of the *Bhakti mārga*, it was imperative for a follower to acquire knowledge from a competent preceptor in order to attain salvation. This led to the practise of venerating and total adulation and surrender to a guru for acquiring knowledge. There was dominance of gurus from the Pāsupatha Kālāmukha sects during the reign of Rājārāja and his son Rājendra. Therefore, if one of the disciples is taken to be Rājārāja, then the sage may be Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita, who is referred to as the *guru* of the king in an inscription (*uḍaiyār Śrī Rājārājadevar gurukkal*).⁷ Because of his venerated position, equivalent or above the king, he had donated the *stūpis* of the subshrines of the *dikpālas*, otherwise only the king donated the *stūpi*. An endowment was made later and recorded on the walls of the temple, benefitting the disciples, particularly

from the Ārya- Madhya- and Gauḍa- *dēsa* of the *guru* Pāvanapiḍāraṇ, who obviously succeeded Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita.⁸

The sacred banyan tree is depicted here to highlight the unlimited *jñāna* of the teacher seated below. Like the tree and its numerous areal roots, *jñāna* sprouts from the *guru* in many forms and spreads all over. Since the master painter knew that his depiction is that of a venerated *guru* of the king, he exempted himself from the conventions of painting and took artistic license to change the tree into a live one. The result was a grand display of attitudes of animals in a banyan tree, perhaps only one of its kind in the compendium of Indian art. Contrastingly, the painter had restrained himself by portraying a simple and peaceful banyan tree with the suspended *pokkaṇam*, *daṇḍa*, bunch of peacock feathers, a cobra quietly coiling itself on a far away branch and a few undisturbed birds in the next panel. The life, as composed here is totally absent. The reason being that there is a depiction of Śiva in his Dakṣiṇāmūrthi aspect below that banyan tree. Interestingly, there is no representation of Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrthi in the *Śrī Vimāna*.⁹



Story of Sundarar



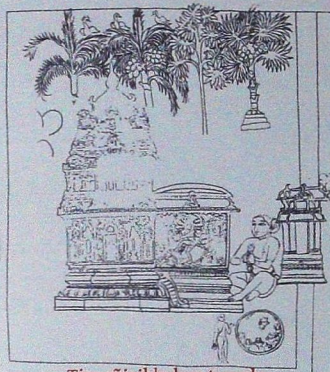
Devasa Adityas

Devasa Rudras

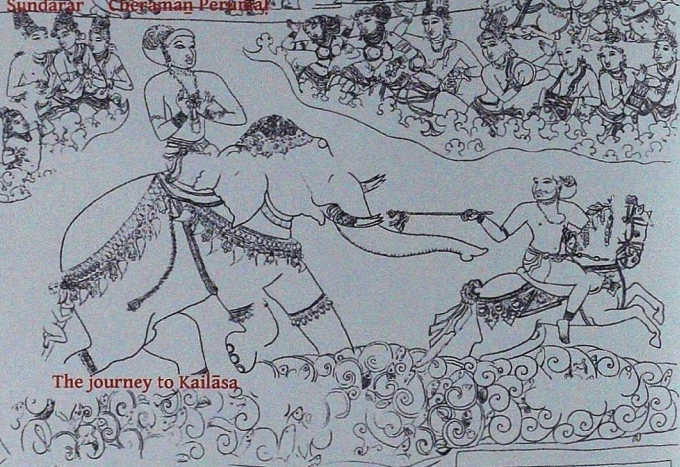
The Kailasa

Sundara

Chesana Perumal



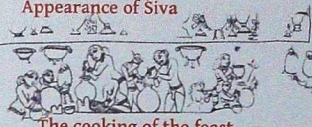
Tiruañjaikkalam temple



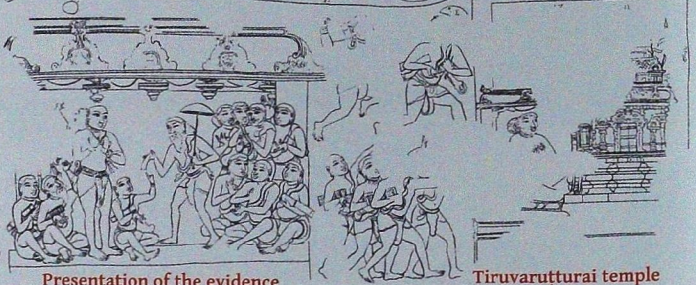
The journey to Kailasa



Appearance of Siva



The cooking of the feast



Presentation of the evidence

Tiruvartturai temple

2. Story of Sundarar

As one moves further in the clockwise direction along the passage, in Chamber 9, the story of Sundarar is painted. The state of preservation of the painting is excellent, the colours are bright and vibrant, and the lines are easily discernible. The damage is limited to small patches. There is considerable erosion at the top due to seepage of water. Because of excellent preservation, it provides ample scope to observe, interpret, and admire the skills of the Chōla painter. Before describing and interpreting the contents, it is necessary to describe the life of the Śaiva saint Sundarar.¹⁰

Rebirth of Ālāla Sundara as Sundarar

Ālāla Sundara was a devotee residing in Kailāsa, performing humble services for the Lord. By divine orchestration, he fell in love with two damsels, Kamalini and Anintitai, who were the maids of Pārvatī. Even though Ālāla Sundara realised his mistake, Śiva ordered him to be born again in the mortal world, and marry the two damsels and enjoy all his earthly desires, before returning back permanently to Kailāsa. Sundara was dismayed at this sentence. He pleaded with Śiva against this appalling order, but without any success. Therefore, he requested the benevolent Lord to intervene and prevent him from plummeting deep into the abyss of earthly pleasures. Śiva assured him that he would be redeemed at an appropriate time.

By the grace of the Lord, Ālāla Sundara was born in a devout Ādiśaiva Brahmaṇa family of Saḍaiyanār and Isaijñāni, living in Navalur in the Tirumunaippāḍināḍu region (around present day Villupuram). He was named Nambi Ārūran (hereafter Nambi). When the boy attained marriageable age, Saḍaiyanār, decided to give him in marriage to the daughter of Saṭaṅgavi Śivāchāriyār. The preparations for a grand marriage was set in motion. On the day of the marriage, all the elders, relatives, near and dear ones were assembled on the stage at Navalur. Nambi, well dressed befitting his status as the bridegroom, entered the stage. The rituals for the marriage were begun and were well underway.

Intervention of Śiva – *Taṭuttāṭkoḷḷutal*

As promised, it was time for Śiva to intervene. He appeared as an old Brahmaṇa on the stage and claimed that Nambi was his slave. Everybody was shocked at this claim as a Brāhmaṇa could never be somebody's slave. Nambi became furious at this claim and began to admonish the old man and called him a lunatic (Tamil: *pitta*). On the contrary, the old man was steadfast in his claims. Nambi lost his temper and demanded proof for this absurd claim. Unperturbed, the old man claimed that he had a signed document given by an ancestor of Nambi. He refused to show the written proof to Nambi, but was prepared to



Story of Sundarar, full view



Story of Sundarar, detail of Taṭuttāṭkoḷḷutal incidents



Story of Sundarar, detail of the journey to Kailāsa
by Sundarar and Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ



Story of Sundarar, details of the Kailāsa



Journey to Kailāsa by Sundarar and Chēramāṇ Perumā, including the detail on the offsets

show it only to the elders. Nambi was extremely upset at this and forcibly snatched the palm-leaf from the old man and tore it, on the premise that it was not customary for a Brāhmaṇa to be the slave of another. The old man, upset at the behaviour of Nambi, pleaded with the elders for justice.

The elders took control of the situation and began to enquire about the old man's antecedents so that they could resolve the dispute. The old man replied that he belonged to Tiruvonnainallur and asserted that the palm-leaf torn by Nambi was only a copy. The original was preserved at Tiruvonnainallur. The elders decided that the dispute could only be resolved after verifying the original deed by the *sabhā* of Tiruvonnainallur. Before the *sabhā* of the Tiruvonnainallur, the old man produced the original document, the veracity of which was ensured by comparing the signatures in other documents. After due verification of the signatures in the document, the old man's claim that an ancestor of Nambi had indeed relinquished all his progeny to him was authenticated. This was accepted by the *sabhā* and Nambi stood defeated.

Not having seen him for generations, the *sabhā* wanted further proof and ordered the old man to show his house and properties within the village. The old man swiftly moved into the Tiruvārutturai temple, the temple of Tiruvonnainallur and disappeared. Having accepted defeat, Nambi followed the old man into the temple, so did the members of the *sabhā* and others. All were surprised at the sudden disappearance of the old man. Nambi genuinely believed that he had to serve the old man as his slave.

Nambi as Sundarar

Śiva reappeared to make Nambi realise his antecedents, as His devotee in Kailāsa and his destiny in the mortal world. Nambi became ecstatic and pleaded to the Lord to guide him. The Lord ordained that he would be pleased, if only Nambi sings his praise in the sweet Tamil language. Nambi, who had not mastered poetry until then, was bewildered and requested the Lord for the lead word. Śiva mischievously ordered that he should begin with the word '*pittā*', which meant an insane individual and the term Nambi used in anger to address Śiva at the time of the dispute. Nambi, thus, composed the first *patikam*, a decade of songs in praise of the god of Tiruvonnainallur beginning with the word '*pittā*'.¹¹ These incidents are famously called *Taṭuttāṭkoḷḷutal*.

That moment onwards, the life of Nambi or Sundarar was very eventful as the servitor of all servitors (*aḍiyārkkū aḍiyēn*) of Śiva. Once he chose the path of *bhakti*, he departed on a pilgrimage to Tillai (Chidambaram), Tiruvarur besides many other places of religious significance. He rendered hymns in praise of God. He met Paravaiyār, who was Kamalini, one of the two damsels of Kailāsa and married her. She was spending large amounts of money in the service of the Lord and his servitors. Therefore, on many occasions Sundarar

had to plead to Śiva for help, which was always extended after obtaining a decade of hymns. The choice of words in the hymns of Sundarar well and truly manifest the kind of relationship that existed between the disparate friends and extols a complex relationship, which endured in a state of timeless eternity. Sundarar also met and married the other damsel Anintitai, born as Saṅgiliyār at Tiruvorriyur near Madras (Chennai). On his departure to meet Paravai, he lost his eyesight since he broke his word given to his new wife. He also lost the trust of Paravaiyār on his arrival. It required the mercy and personal diplomacy of Śiva respectively to regain both.

Sundarar and Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ

Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ ruled Chēra country with ancient Koḍuṅkōḷur (also known as Mākōtai, the modern Kodungallore) as his capital. He was a contemporary of the Pāṇḍyan king Kōchchaḍaiyan Raṇadīra and possibly ruled in the early eighth century AD. He was a staunch devotee of Śiva. As a gesture of his appreciation for the deep devotion of Chēramāṇ, Śiva blessed him with an unique power of listening to the sweet chimes of his anklet every day, the jingles emanate from the Lord's great *ānandatāṇḍava* performed at Tillai at the end of his daily worship. It also so happened that Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ could not hear the customary chime on a particular day. He was upset and was about to slay himself. Śiva made him appreciate that the delay was actually on his part, as he had lost track of time while listening to the soulful rendition of hymns by Sundarar at Tillai. Obviously, the friend had precedence over the devotee. This made Chēramāṇ to visit Chōla country to befriend Sundarar. He arrived at Tillai to a grand reception by all. At Tillai, he composed the *Ponvaṇṇa Tiruvantāti*, the first of his three works, included in the eleventh *Tirumurai* collection. From Tillai, Chēramāṇ went to Tiruvarur to meet Sundarar. They became thick friends. After a healthy and religiously stimulating sojourn, both decided on a pilgrimage to the Pāṇḍyan country.

Journey to Kailāsa

After returning from Pāṇḍyan country, Sundarar left for the Chēra country along with Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ and soon returned to Chōla country to see his wife. He was attached emotionally to Chēramāṇ and could not resist a trip back. One day, as he was praying in the Tiruāṇjaikaḷam temple in Mākōtai, he felt that the end was very near. On his prayer, the proverbial white elephant, accompanied by gods, was sent by Śiva to bring Sundarar to Kailāsa.¹² His dear friend, Chēramāṇ Perumāḷ, equally a great devotee, was not to be left behind. On seeing that his dear friend had departed for Kailāsa at the invitation of the Lord, he too mounted his horse and uttered the *pañchākshara*, (*namasivāya*) in its ears. The utterance was enough to give divine powers to the horse, as it galloped through the

horizon to reach the gates of Kailāsa ahead of the elephant carrying Sundarar. However, permission to enter Kailāsa was given only for Sundarar, and hence Chēramāṇ was stopped by the *gaṇās*. Sundarar intervened and obtained permission not only for Chēramāṇ to enter, but also to enact a work of him, *Tirukkayilāya-ulā*, an unique composition, the first of the *ulā*-kind of poetry in Tamil.¹³ Sundarar occupies an unique position amongst the Śaiva Nāyanmārs, and Rājarāja felt the need to capture this dynamic devotion of Śiva's devotee on canvas in Rājarājēśvaram.

Description of the Panel

The whole canvas is divided into three horizontal divisions, each division assigned to a set of events of the legend of Sundarar described earlier. At the bottom, occupying about a quarter of the height of the whole panel is the depiction of the incidents that took place at Tirunavalur and Tiruvennainallur, where Śiva appeared to make Sundarar realise his antecedents. In the middle division, Sundarar is shown worshipping at the Tiruaṇjaikkalām temple and then the journey of the friends' to Kailāsa is panoramically portrayed. The remaining canvas on the top is devoted to a magnificent depiction of Kailāsa. Other miraculous incidents that occurred in the life of Sundarar are not depicted.

Depiction from Marriage to *Taṭuttāṭkolḷutal*

There are very thick bands of yellow and red separating the depiction from the floor. The sequence of events popularly known as *Taṭuttāṭkolḷutal*, that is Śiva's intervention in the life of Nambi to stop him from entering into a matrimonial alliance, is portrayed in five distinct segments, with two segments dedicated to events that happened at Tirunavalur and the rest to the Tiruvennainallur incidents. The theme of the five segments are: several persons, men and women alike, involved in the preparation of the feast, the guests assembled under a *pandal* (shelter) and Śiva appearing as an old man, the argument and verification of documents, Nambi following Śiva into the temple of Tiruvennainallur, and the temple itself in which a person is shown seated. The depiction continues onto the offsets, but is completely defaced in the adjoining offset. In the next, there is a depiction of a few devotees standing under a tree.

Cooking of the Feast

The cooking of the feast is very elaborately composed. A group of ten persons are shown involved in the preparation of the feast. Among them, nine are women and one is a male. The man and another woman appear to be the chief cooks, and the rest are doing other chores like straining, shifting the vessels and dishes, stoking the fire etc. Cooking for a feast during the Chōla period was evidently a collective activity with tasks divided between smaller groups. The very design of the *chulah* (cooking stove), where the



The cooking of the feast

firewood is used as the fuel, looks very similar to the *chulah* that is in use even today. There are exclusive assistants to stoke the fire. A variety of utensils and vessels are being used. There are a few unique egg-shaped vessels, perhaps with an airtight lid, used for straining liquids. There are also tripods to hold heavy dishes provided with rings. From the colour scheme, it can be discerned that there was both earthenware and metal ware. This small depiction provides interesting information about a mundane activity like cooking.

The Marriage Hall, the Gathering and Entry of Śiva as an Old Man

Just above this segment, the guests are seated on a raised platform that would generally be covered with a temporary *vithāna* on special occasions. The *adhishthāna* of the platform is simple, typically with mouldings of an early Chōla temple. The *vithāna* shown over the assembled persons is significant. It was definitely of cloth (like the present day *shāmiāna*) decorated with a long bands of decorations including a middle frieze of about thirty-two geese figures, all in similar posture and attitude. This repeated depiction of a number of geese in the same attitude at one place is very rare in the compendium of Indian art. Geese and *gaṇās* are the favourite motifs of ancient Indian painters and sculptors,



The *vithāna* with details of geese

where they demonstrated their creativity by inventing several hilarious postures. However, this particular monotonous depiction was clearly intentional and with significance. In the original cloth, the motifs were probably executed by block printing (something like the latter day Kalamkāri tradition). In fact, when the painter had to depict a similar cloth roof, true to the original that was in use during Chōla times, he had to repeat the similar looking figures of geese.

Below the stage, several vessels, bowls and pitchers, obviously with many auspicious articles required for the performance of marriage ritual are portrayed. In the *pandal*, both young and old are gathered to grace the occasion. Some are very old with greying beards, while others are young with slender moustaches. What is common among the figures is the expression of mild surprise on their faces. The reason for this is the entry of Śiva as the old man and his claim over Sundarar. The depiction of Śiva is damaged, but the tiny umbrella held by him is still visible. However, it is difficult to decide whether Sundarar was also depicted in this segment or not.

Taṭuttāṭkoḷḷutal

Having indicated that the marriage of Nambi was on with all gaiety by depicting the scene of cooking and the assembled guests on the marriage platform, the painter proceeds to depict in the third segment of *Taṭuttāṭkoḷḷutal* sequence of events, the appeal on the dispute at Tiruvennainallur. Considering the importance of this event, it is very prominently depicted right in the middle of this division. The change of location is suggested with different faces and structure where they had assembled. The hall at Tiruvennainallur is a permanent one with many pillars supporting the roof and an overhanging *kapōta*, ornate and with impressive *kūḍus*. In ancient Tamil Nadu, important villages had permanent halls for the meetings of the assembly (*sabhā*). The assemblies were an integral part of day-to-day life of the villages.¹⁴

Standing tall amidst those assembled, is an old man, who is none other than Lord Śiva himself. He is old and fragile. A perceptible bent in his frame suggests his advanced age. Nevertheless, the energy is boundless and its magnitude is well reflected in his firm grip of the umbrella. His upper garment is twisted across his body. His right hand holds the original deed, a palm-leaf having the signature of the ancestor of Nambi, the only evidence in the dispute. Standing in front of him is Nambi, in all humility and respect as the dispute is before a quasi-judicial assembly. He is well dressed, appropriate for a bridegroom, in a silk lower garment, bejewelled with necklaces of beads and other ornaments.

The hall is packed with elders, competent to judge the merits of the case. Village accountants cum record keepers are ready with bundles of palm-leaf to validate the signature in the document in the possession of the old man. The oldest among the village



Tatuttāṭkollūtal – Śiva presenting the evidence, note the expressions on the faces

elders, is depicted with his hand up, as if proposing the case and perhaps asking for proof because the claim was unheard of. The members of the *sabhā* are shown minutely checking the palm-leaf presented by the old man. All of them look extremely bewildered at the genuineness of the evidence presented by the old man. The painter was at his creative best, as he was able to capture the variety of expressions on their faces with his brushwork. He was also careful enough to paint very minutely a few words (now barely readable) in the palm-leaf held by a member. The writing is in Tamil characters of the tenth century AD.¹⁵ The whole sequence of argument and presentation of the evidence was brilliantly composed by the Chōla painter. The passage of time is depicted by the changing attitude of the figures – the elders presenting the case, the old man providing the evidence and the officials checking the genuineness of the signature of the ancestor of Nambi.

The story progresses further as the elders were not done and satisfied with only the clinching documentary evidence. They required corroborative facts like the residence of the old man within the village, since no one had seen him before. The depiction proceeds with the old man, pretending to show his residence, swiftly entering into a temple. Nambi,

having lost the case, accepts the fact that he had to serve the old man. Being inculcated to uphold the *dharma*, he follows the old man to become his eternal slave. In this depiction, the movement suggested in the figure of the old man is silky, whereas that of Nambi is like a sprinter. Other elders, with a bundle of palm leaves tucked under their armpits, were following them in a stroll as their role had ended.

The depiction of the Tiruvaruṭṭurai temple reveals that the Chōla painter was well versed with architecture too. The plan is simple with the *garbha-griha* and a *mukha-maṇḍapa*. The elevation follows that of any contemporary Chōla temple. The interesting feature is that the *pāda* portion depicts a closed but functional door. It seems that the painter was clearly influenced by the design of Rājarājēśvaram, as contemporary temples in the region were never built with functional median doors. The elevation of the temple, in profile, has been brilliantly executed. In the *maṇḍapa*, detached from the main temple, is a seated figure. This must be Sundarar, composing his first hymn. Beyond this, on the



Taṭuttāṭkollūtal - Śiva entering the Tiruvaruṭṭurai temple

offsets, a few persons are standing by the side of a tree. This may be the *sthala-vriksha* of the temple.

Tiruañjaikkaḷam Temple

The painter chose not to depict all the miraculous events that happened in Nambi's life as he proceeds to depict Tiruañjaikkaḷam and the ascent to Kailāsa from there. This portion of the panel begins with a depiction of Sundarar singing the *patikam* in praise of Añjaikkaḷattān. The temple of Tiruañjaikkaḷam is bound by a *prākāra*, (represented by a thick yellow band) with a *mahā-dvara*, shown in profile. It is a *tritala vimāna* fully covered with gold and embellished with precious stones. Technically, there is an open *mukha-maṇḍapa*, which also acts as a *sabhā-maṇḍapa*, enshrining an image of Naṭarāja accompanied by Dēvī leaning on the bull with a parasol above her.

There is a circular pond in the open, covered with fully blown lilies and lotuses. A young boy, in all probability, a novice who has just been initiated into sainthood at a very young age, indicated by the string of *rudrākshas* around his head, has collected some flowers from the pond for the *pūjā* and is chanting some verses. Within the complex are a few coconut/areca nut trees, with bunches of fruits. A platform or *pīṭha* is provided around the base of one of the trees, indicating its sacredness as a *sthala-vriksha*. Seated in front of the temple and well within the periphery wall is Sundarar, singing with his customary cymbals. It is needless to say that he is composing his *patikam* (decade) to the Lord of the temple.

It may be mentioned here that this depiction has been interpreted variously. Sivaramamurti identified it as that of a 'typical early Chōla temple of Naṭarāja in the vicinity on which are seated princely devotees', Nagaswamy identifies it as the shrine of Tillai, which Sundarar visits immediately after the intervention of Śiva, Champakalakshmi and Venkataraman as the temple Tiruañjaikkaḷam but with Chēramān singing in praise of Naṭarāja and hears the sound of his anklet.¹⁶ Sivaramamurti's identification is a very general statement. The identification as the shrine of Tillai is logical, as the sequence is correct. However, the image of Naṭarāja is placed in the *mukha-maṇḍapa*, rather than the sanctum. If it is the temple of Tillai, then Naṭarāja must be the presiding deity, not kept as an *utsavabhēra* in an axial *maṇḍapa*. Judging from the profile of the temple, it is a *tritala vimāna* with a flat-roofed *maṇḍapa* in front. In the next panel, Chōla painters had accurately depicted the twin *sabhās* of Tillai (Chidambaram) with a typical vaulted roof. Therefore, identifying this temple, as that of Chidambaram is not convincing. Further, the waves through which the elephant carrying Sundarar is wading are depicted as if they were lashing the temple. Therefore, Tiruañjaikkaḷam looks more like the plausible identification. It is not very difficult to

identify the person seated in front of the temple as Sundarar, the clashing of cymbals clinching the issue.¹⁷

The Journey to Kailāsa

Covering three-fourths of the breadth of the panel at this level is a magnificent depiction of Sundarar's journey on a white elephant to Kailāsa. The lines are rhythmic and the colours sophisticated. The measure of execution is of the highest order. If there is any portion of the entire sequence of murals which could be termed as a masterpiece, then this portion qualifies without any argument whatsoever.

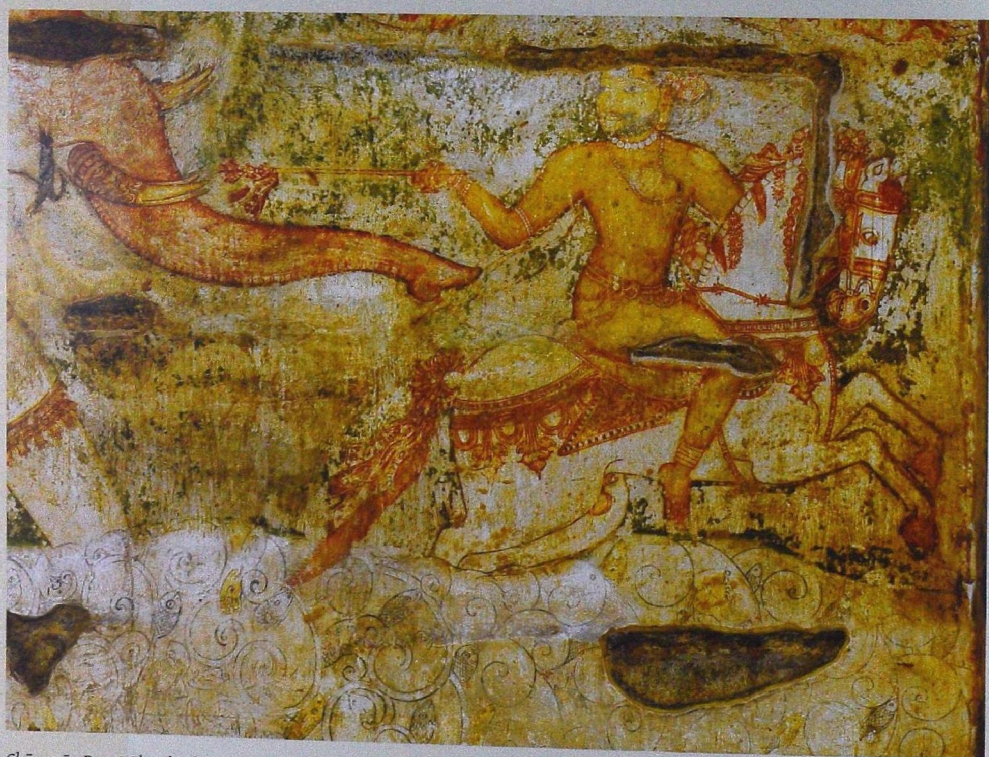
The painter depicts Sundarar atop the highly decorated white elephant. The divine elephant has a pair of golden tusks, the ends of which are split into three points, to suggest that it is the legendary *shāddanta* variety. The trunk is red. The decoration of the elephant is very carefully composed and executed. The ornamentation is adequately rich. The forehead is covered with knitted lacework, the edge of which is relieved with pearl festoonery. There is a tight neckband studded with precious stones. Two identical straps, one with smaller bells and the other with larger bells alternate with feather festoons (*kuñjaram*) are fixed tightly around the neck and the hind portion of the body. A simple strap without bells encircles the body. Similar straps with bells are tied just above the knee. A long chain, with a bell attached to its ends and thrown over the body simply accentuates the grandeur of the ornamentation. The beast swiftly wades through the waves. Keeping harmony with its movement is the swing of the chain. Seated atop in the *padmāsana*, is Sundarar with a cymbal, suggesting that he is singing the last decade.

Fittingly the horse of Chēramāṇ too is well-decorated with a golden saddle, reins, halters and bridles. Chēramāṇ holds a whip (?) and points it towards Sundarar, perhaps implying that he, being his friend, could not be left behind like this. The horse had to compete with a divine beast. The intensity of its galloping is well portrayed by its fully bent head and forelegs. The energy to defy gravity was derived from the mere uttering of the *pañchakshara*. The depiction suggests that the friends were about to commence their climb from the horizon. Even in this very solemn depiction, the painter found scope to bring in a little fun. A commoner, possibly strolling along the shores and finding the elephant taking off into the horizon, caught the tail of the divine elephant for a free ride. Perhaps, he was trying to take a short-cut route to Kailāsa!

The entire breadth below the elephant and the horse is portrayed as a white surf representing the sea adjacent to the temple. The waves are indicated by double spiralling and single lines of black on a white background. A variety of marine animals like several species of fishes, some common, a few having shark-like features, crabs, sea-elephant (?), an animal with long trunk like face), live shells and the rest are interspersed in the

swirling waves, providing an interesting insight into knowledge of the painter about marine life.

As the friends are on their way beyond the horizon, the dancers, musicians and other members of Kailāsa welcome them. They appear behind brilliantly executed clouds. The farthest to the left is a person holding fully blown lilies and lotus (*alar* in Tamil, a term used by Sundarar) in his right hand and the left hand is held the *patāka hasta*. Next to him are three divine persons in animated conversation among themselves, obviously discussing the unique opportunity given to Sundarar by Śiva. Further to the right of the viewer, in the same segment, are a group of musicians and dancers. Among the dancers, two are female and the one is a male. The female dancers are bedecked with strings of pearls around their necks, breasts and waists. Even their bracelets are of pearls. Their coiffure is marked by the habitual use of excessive flowers. The male dancer's coiffeur is a simple *jaṭā-makuṭa*. The common feature among them is that they hold a fully blown flower in their left hand and the right hand is held high in the *patāka hasta*, as if they are



Chēramān Perumāḷ on his horse

welcoming great friends. The male divine dancer proves that he is equal to his female counterparts in having a flexible body, which can be twisted into any position.

Further to the right are three male musicians, two of whom are playing on a small drum. The third is clashing large cymbals. Beyond this group, as the depiction spreads over the offsets, there is another male member with an outstretched left hand in *patāka hasta*, obviously admiring the guest and at the extraordinary status bestowed on them by his Lord. Next to him, is a conch-blower, who, instead of blowing the conch, is admiring the journey of the friends. Painted further, in the offsets are two more male figures, one playing a flute and the other announcing the arrival of the honoured guests. A *gaṇa* is playing on a drum, which resembles the modern *mṛdanga*.

A dancer is depicted in an extraordinary posture in the offset. She is performing her piece, on the horizon, because the painter abruptly ends the swirling waves of the sea, through which the friends are journeying. She had entwined her body beyond imagination by twisting her head to look back, an astonishing posture having no parallels in depictions elsewhere.

The depiction of clouds, here and elsewhere in the murals is another achievement of the highest order of the Chōla painter. It is continuously depicted in a typical trefoil pattern. Mostly white in colour, the arches of the trefoils are vibrantly shaded in gradients using yellow and red. The flow of the lines is indeed very rhythmic in the ups and downs. The volume and mass was brought out by multi-layering of the pattern. The designs of the clouds are indeed a treat for the eyes.

The Kailāsa

The entire upper portion of the canvas is devoted in depicting Kailāsa. It is beyond the eyelevel of visitors. Many have failed to identify the details because of the



The divine dancer



Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmūrti

crowded depiction of figures. Śiva, the Lord of Kailāsa is on the far side of this segment. He is seated under a banyan tree on a well-spread out tiger skin, interestingly with a *yōga-paṭṭa* tied around his bent right knee and the waist. The customary bag of ashes, the *pokkanam*, and a bunch of peacock feathers and a rattling snake are all hanging from various branches of the tree. He holds the usual attributes of battleaxe (*maḷu, parasu*) in his upper right hand and the deer (*mṛigha*) in his left. His lower right arm is placed straight on the bent right knee, the left is held in a manner of exclamation, being pleased at the devotion and unflinching *bhakti* of his devotees. By depicting Śiva with *yōga-paṭṭa* under a banyan tree with all the complimentary features, the painter conveys the Dakṣiṇāmūrti aspect of Śiva, even though he is not depicted in the usual teaching posture, and there are no *rishis* to listen to his discourse on *jñāna*. He is participating in the activities of Kailāsa. His consort Umā is shown at his side.

The very depiction of Śiva at the far end of this segment is a very thoughtful use of space. It facilitated the depiction of the panoramic view of Kailāsa. Seated majestically at Śiva's feet is the bejewelled Nandi. Surrounding it are many *gaṇās*, in different modes of playing musical instruments and keeping time (*tāḷam*) with mere hands. Attending on

Umā, are two damsels Kamalini and Anintitai with whom Sundarar fell in love (or Gaṅgā and Yamunā?). In front of Śiva, are a pair of divine dancers performing a dance sequence in a perfectly synchronised posture. For this performance, Kālī keeps the timing with her hands. Four *gaṇas* accompany her on the conch, drum, flute and cymbals, providing the background score for the dance performance. Kaṇṇappar, in the typical hunter costumes, is standing beside.

Seated on the floor, in all obedience to their Lord, are Chēramāṇ and Sundarar. Chēramāṇ is in the front with folded hands with Sundarar behind with his usual cymbals. Traditionally it is believed that Chēramāṇ was denied entry into Kailāsa, but was allowed after accepting his wish to enact his literary work, *Tirukkaylāya-ulā*, the first of *Ulā*-type of poetry in front of Śiva. Accordingly, the whole scene may be taken as an enactment of the work by Chēramāṇ.

Witnessing these great celebrations, are the other gods - Brahmā and Viṣṇu, besides four other gods, among them Agni is clearly identifiable, as he is depicted with a prominent flame as a halo. In addition to the gods, there are eight important devotees, five of whom are males and three females, all seated on a common platform. The first among the males and the last two females are clashing the cymbals. One male devotee is playing on the *ḍamaru*. If this group is to be identified with the significant and great Nāyanmārs, the first of them could be Sambandar, because this figure looks very young and could be a child-devotee. It may be recalled here that Sambandar was a child prodigy, because he was breast-fed by Umā herself, and attained salvation at a very young age. However, this identification is highly tentative.

Ēkadasa Rudrās and the Dvādasa Ādityās, sages, including Nārada(?), and other damsels are witnessing this magnificent assembly of gods and devotees at Kailāsa, behind the formation of clouds. This may be indicative of their transient nature. The Rudrās carry all the attributes of Śiva, like the third eye, crescent, *jaṭā-makuṭa* while the Ādityās are depicted in red with a halo of fire around their head. The Kailāsa is defined within a periphery, as a two-storied *mālīka* decorated with brilliant curtains tied from pillar to pillar is shown in the background.

Influence of Sundarar's *Patikams* in the Depiction

The whole depiction of Sundarar's journey to Kailāsa looks very much influenced by the narration found in the hymns of Sundarar. In his hymns about the Lord of Tiruaṇjaikkaḷam, Sundarar describes the nature of the sea that was lashing the temple encircled by groves.¹⁸ The roaring waves are as strong as the mountains, as they churn out marine life like conches, pearls and others from the bottom of the seabed to the shore. A careful look at the panel will reveal that the white waves were painted up to the *prākāra*.



The Kailāsa - Kāli, devotees, gāṇas, Kaṇṇappar, Sundarar and Chēramān Perumāḷ

There are closely spaced coconut/areca trees, a characteristic feature of Chēranāḍu as the background to the temple. The modelling of the waves with strong black lines, singly and in pairs, twisting and twirling in either direction indicate the magnitude of its force, which recalls the graphic description of Sundarar. The wealth of marine vegetation is another influence that the painter had derived from the hymns. While Sundarar stopped with the conch and pearls, the painter extended his imagination to depict a plethora of marine life.

If the depiction of the waves and the temple followed the description in the *patikam* on Tiruāṇjaikkaḷam, then the journey to Kailāsa was inspired by the words of Sundarar, sung in his verses in the *Tirunoṭṭittānmalai patikam*, what was perhaps his final rendering as a mortal.¹⁹ If he narrates his desire to leave this mortal world and his dejection with mundane life in the *Tiruoṇjaikkaḷam patikam*, then the *Tirunoṭṭittānmalai patikam* portrays eternal bliss and joy erupting out of a person so thoroughly overwhelmed by the grace of the Lord, who sent him an elephant to take him to Kailāsa. The tone and tenor of the hymns clearly indicates that he composed the ten hymns as he traversed through the *ākasa* on the gigantic elephant. The divine quality of the elephant warranted special description in every one of the hymns. He praises the elephant as the one that could traverse through ether, a precious possession of the gods, a powerful one that could cause seismic vibrations in the sea, land and mountains alike and when it moves, undoubtedly it is the best among its kind. Accordingly, the painter had modelled the divine elephant with split golden tusks,

thus making it one of the *śaḍḍanta* kind. It was tastefully decorated with straps of bells and *kuñjarams* of feathers. It wades through the sea and reaches the horizon for the final ascent. The movement of such a powerful beast causes turbulence in the water, making all the marine life to come to the top to witness this extraordinary scene. In spite of such strong movements of the elephant, Sundarar was unperturbed and firmly seated on top of the elephant, as he was engrossed in composing his last hymns and in eager anticipation of meeting his dear Lord and friend before attaining the ultimate salvation.

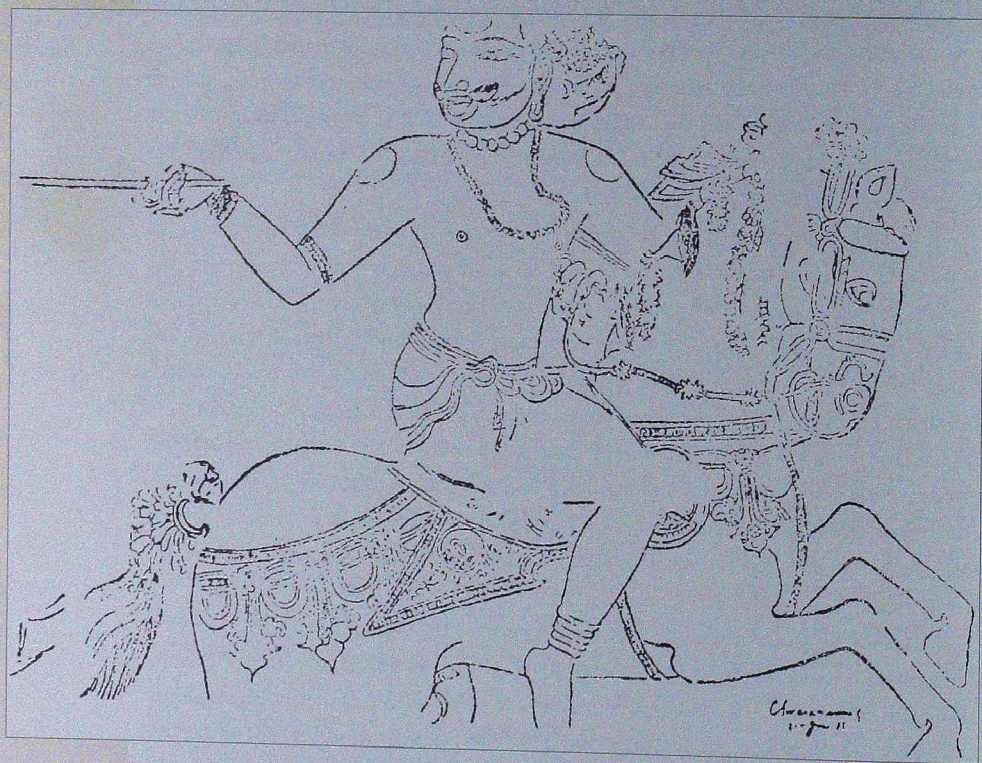
Sundarar describes the kind of reception he got all along his journey. While he was grateful to his master for sending the vehicle, he mentions that the gods accompanied it and delivered the wish of the Lord of Kailāsa. Having rejected the life he led, Sundarar was happy at the moment of salvation with the blessings of the gods. The journey of Sundarar, according to his own words, begins with Varuṇa paying his respects with full-blown flowers as he ascended from the Tiruāṇjaikkaḷam temple to Kailāsa with the same mortal body.²⁰ One Vāṇaṇ, who could give endless boons, bids him goodbye. As he passes through the ether, he records that he heard the chanting of the *āgamas*, hymns and Vedas, reverberating the whole of the *ākasa*. Indra, Viṣṇu, Brahmā and other gods received him at Kailāsa. When other saints enquire, surprised at the scale of reception accorded to him, as to who was coming, the Lord of Kailāsa introduces Sundarar as his friend Āruran. In the last hymn, he requests the Lord of the Sea, Varuṇa to bring back this decade to be recited in front of the god of the Tiruāṇjaikkaḷam temple.²¹

The painter has attempted to be true to the words of these renditions. He shows the journey of Sundarar with his mortal body. The whole range of figures depicted in the clouds above the ascent clearly captures the reverberating divine reception he got on his way, though it is difficult to identify the Vāṇaṇ and Varuṇa among them. The music and dance indicate the happy occasion. It is just sufficient to note that every one of them is holding a fully blown flower (*alar* in Tamil), as described in the decades of Sundarar, to understand to what extent the painter was influenced by the hymns. Incidentally, Sundarar did not narrate the simultaneous ascent of his friend Chēramāṇ. Perhaps, the strong prevailing tradition that Chēramāṇ too simultaneously went to Kailāsa, attested by Nambi Aṇḍār Nambi in his work, inspired the painter, when he composed the whole scene.

It cannot be stated with any certainty whether the lives of the other two great Nāyanmārs – Sambandar and Appar – were ever painted in this gallery. It is prudent to assume that Rājarāja did so, and such depictions are either hidden under the Nāyaka layer, or even lost well before the Nāyakas repainted the passage. However, the important reason for this magnificent depiction could be that Sundarar enjoyed an extraordinary

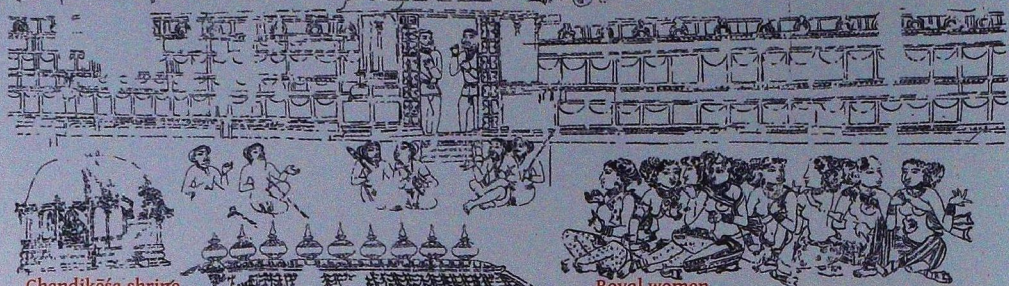
relationship with Śiva as his friend. Perhaps, Rājarāja wanted to imply that his devotion to Śiva should be viewed on a similar plane.

It is generally held that Sēkkiḷār, author of *Periya Purāṇam* written in the Twelfth Century, was inspired by this depiction.²² His vivid description of Sundarar's marriage, *Tatuttāṭkoṇḍa*-episode and the ascent of the friends covering one full chapter are taken as evidence to attest to the fact that this painting inspired him, which is indeed quite likely.



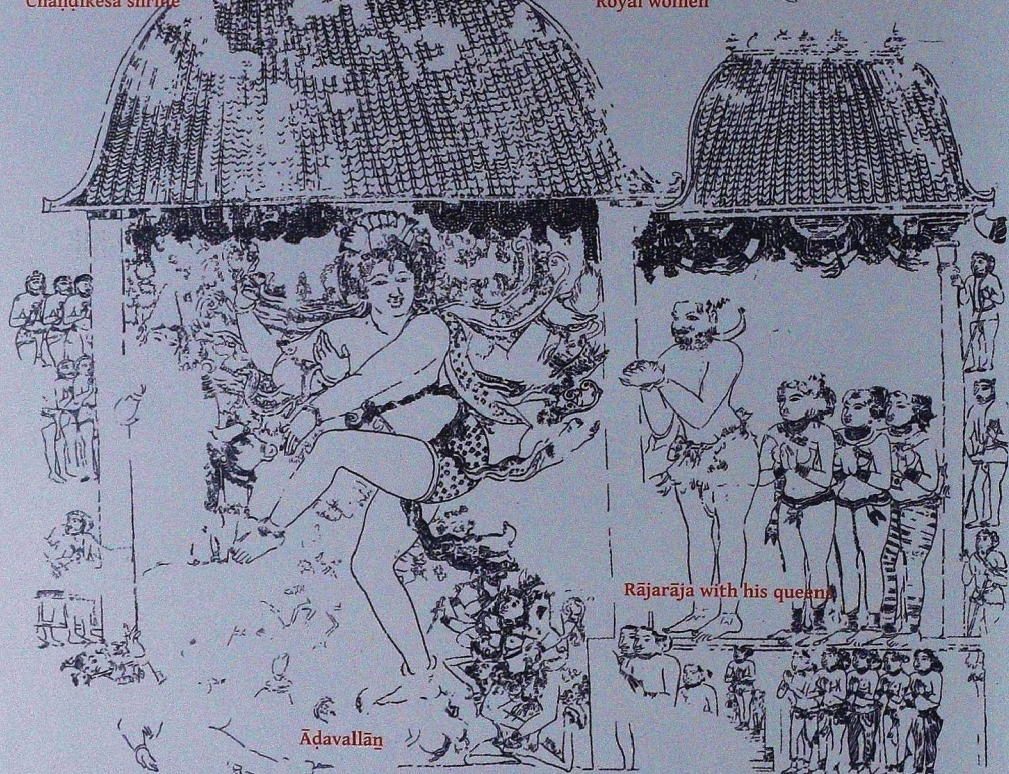


Rājarāja Worshipping Naṭarāja at 'The Kōyil'



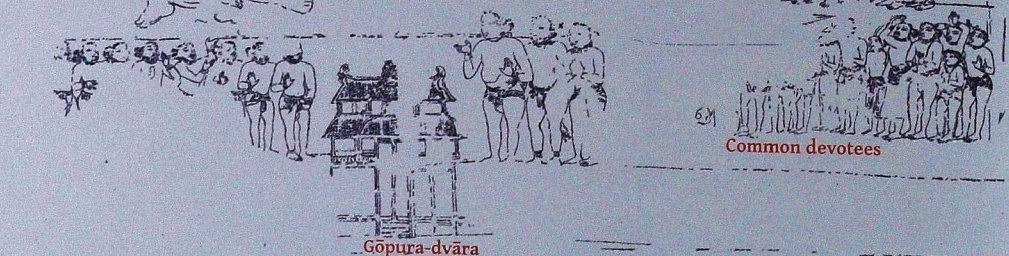
Chandikēśa shrine

Royal women



Rājarāja with his queens

Ādavallān



Common devotees

Gōpura-dvāra

3. Rājarāja Worshipping Naṭarāja at ‘The Kōyil’

As one moves further along the *pradakṣhiṇā-patha*, a gigantic depiction of Naṭarāja is on view in Chamber 9. Undoubtedly, the magnificent depiction of Naṭarāja, dominating the composition attracts attention at once of the viewer. In this process, the details depicted all around become visually imperceptible. This is a depiction of Rājarāja offering his prayer to his personal god Naṭarāja, the Lord of the Kōyil at Tillai (Chidambaram). It was discussed elsewhere about the extraordinary devotion of Rājarāja to Naṭarāja, aptly called Āḍavallāṇ in Tamil. Naṭarāja was not only his personal deity, but also the family deity (*kulaṇāyakam*) of the Chōla dynasty. There is no surprise that Rājarāja chose this theme for a grand depiction. The conception and composition is as if Naṭarāja is performing the cosmic dance again for his ardent devotee Rājarāja and therefore the depiction is eclectic.

If at all there is one point from where the description about the contents of this panel should begin, it must obviously be from the depiction of Naṭarāja himself. He performs the dance in the *chitsabhā*, the sanctum sanctorum of the temple, on the *apasmāra*, the embodiment of ignorance. Dēvī, his consort, Kālī dancing on a corpse, Kāraikkāl Ammaiyaṛ, a devotee who sacrificed her feminine charm to remain eternally as his devotee. Nandi, his mount and *gaṇas*, accompanying him on musical instruments and an unidentified god are witnessing the dance. The king and his queens are offering worship from the other hall, while other privileged members of the entourage are assembled in the courtyard (*prākāra*) of the temple, the rest are waiting outside it.

Naṭarāja

The Lord is depicted very majestically in his usual posture with a white hued body. The face has a very gentle but radiant smile. The feathers on his head are neatly arranged in a fan-like fashion, camouflaging the *jaṭā-bhāra*. The *ūmmattan* flower is very prominent on the left side. Unusually, there are four flaming strands of *jaṭā*, painted in red (*seṇjātai*) flowing on either side, perhaps along with an equal number of intervening strings of beads. A small figure of Gaṅga is shown on the right upper strand. The four arms of the Lord are brilliantly fused at the shoulder, which is robust, but they are aesthetic to behold. The upper right hand holds the *ḍamaru*, the index finger drumming it gently to emanate the primordial sound, while the upper left hand holds the *agni*, burning furiously in a small bowl-like dish. The lower left arm is kept in *gaja-hasta*. The corresponding right arm is bent in the *abhaya* gesture. A massive cobra (*sarpavalaya*), with a golden hue and dotted skin structure, is twisted around this hand. The inner portion of the hand (from the wrist onwards) is tinged in flaming red. The flexion of the body is extremely rhythmic. The right



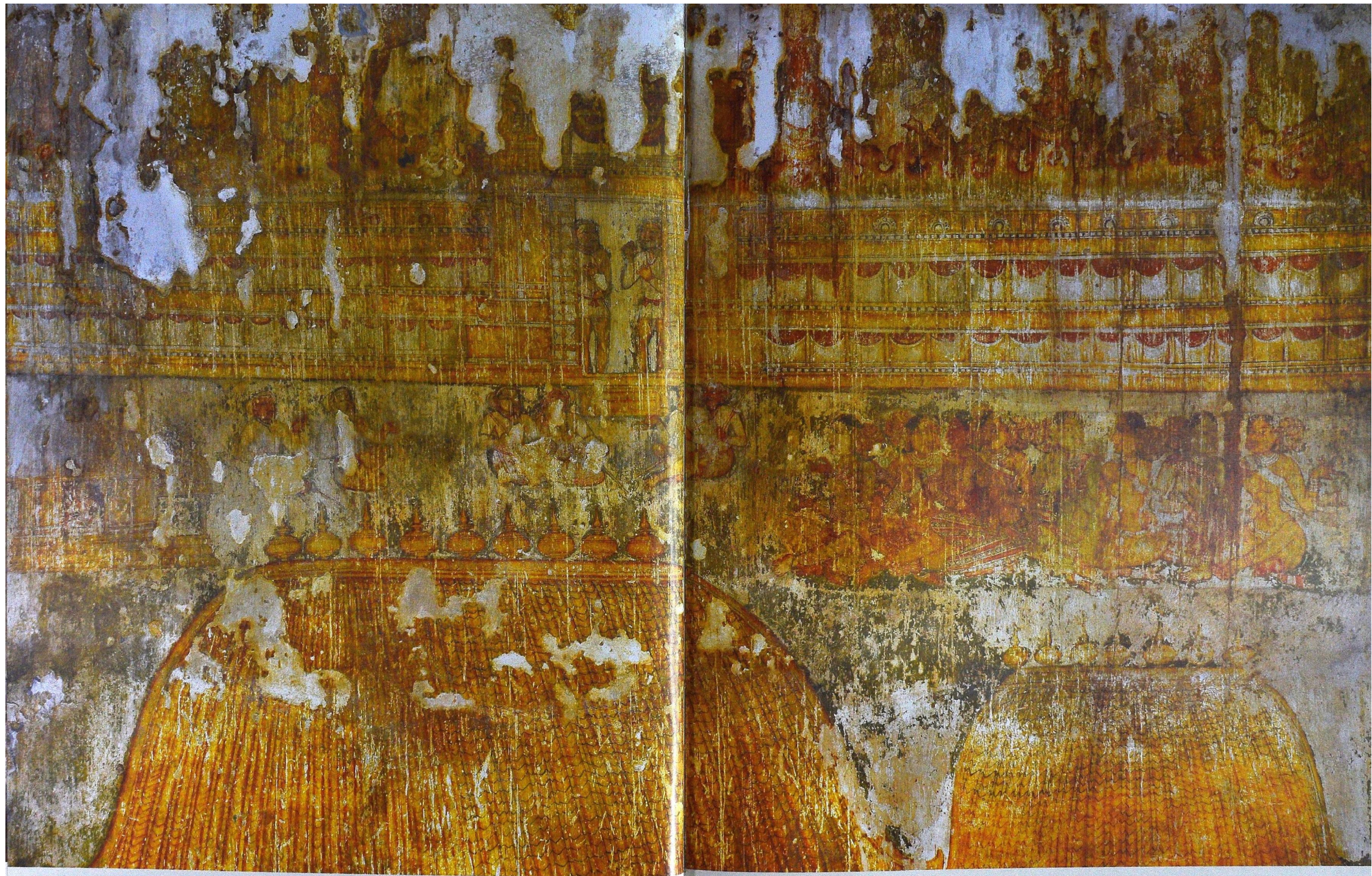
Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Keyil', full view



Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil'
Detail of common devotees



Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil'
Detail of Natarāja, Rājarāja and his queens



Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil'
Detail of prākāra Royal women, mālika



Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōvil'
Royal women depicted on offsets



Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil', detail of offsets



*Rājarāja worshipping Natarāja at 'The Kōyil',
Detail of Natarāja*

leg tramples the *apasmāra*, and the left is lifted up. The feet are painted in red. The *apasmāra*, the personification of complete ignorance, plays with a snake, when being trampled upon by the Lord.

The ornaments are rich, of which only the armlet and anklets are visible. The skin of the tiger, worn around the waist and over the left shoulder, is brilliantly drawn and is relieved with conjoined circular decorations. The chest griddle (*urassūtra*) is rigid and metallic, decorated with twisted cloth and strings of bead and worn like a clasp. The gyrations from the dance provided the inertia for the tassels of the garments to fly around and up towards the left. The long chain of the waist girdle too flows along with the tassels.

The posture and ornamentation are perfect according to the prescriptions of the texts and conventions, while some minor deviations are observed in the execution. The painter on his part was extremely adept in bringing out the gentle smile on his face as approved in the texts. The very effect of the smile depicted on the face of Ādavallāṇ, makes one recollect immediately the description in Appar's hymns (*kovvai sevvāyir kumil sirippu*), the smile gently sprouting like a bud, from the mouth that is red like a ripened core of an ivy-gourd. Incidentally, the tone of red chosen for the lips, however mildly preserved, is brilliant. The whole execution is extraordinary and at once captivating, as if it was a real exhibition of his cosmic dance for the benefit of the king.

Dēvi and the Others

The depiction of Dēvi, leaning on the bull and watching the captivating performance of Ādavallāṇ, is unusually to his right as against the prescribed left. This area of the painting is highly damaged where only the crowned face up to the eyes of the Dēvi is visible. The figure of Nandi, though preserved in a small fragment, is extremely expressive. It is throwing a watchful expression so that no one would interrupt his master's performance. Someone seated at the bottom with the right hand in *vismaya hasta*, and possibly another figure with a thin frame is also watching and admiring the performance. It is difficult to identify them. A *gaṇa* is playing on the flute. The pigment at this portion is completely abraded leaving the ground exposed.

To the left of Śiva, watching this *ānanda tāṇḍava* at his feet, are an eight-armed Kālī, herself dancing in ecstasy over the corpse and Kāraikkāl Ammaiṃ, in full reverence for being blessed to watch the Lord's cosmic dance. Kālī, green in complexion, has the usual attributes in all her arms. Her eyes are protruding, and she performs gyrations in ecstasy, matching that of Śiva.

Rājarāja and his Queens

The smaller hall, placed on the lateral side is similar in architecture to the *sabhā* of Ādavallāṇ. The underside of the brim of the vaulted roof has the usual festoonery. Rājarāja

and his three queens are standing in this hall. The king directly offers worship to his Lord by holding a handful of flowers (*pushpārchana*). His queens are standing behind him with folded hands in *añjali*. Rājarāja is shown bereft of all ornamentation, including the crown, usually associated with a royal person. He is in simple attire with only a shortly tied *antariya* and the *uttariya* tied in reverence around the waist. He is wearing a close-fitting garland of white beads (*sphaṭika*?) and simple ear ornaments. His figure is drawn comparatively larger than the others, only to indicate his status as a staunch devotee of the Lord.

In contrast, his three principal queens are in beautiful costumes and bedecked brilliantly in jewellery of pearls. Their hairdo are elaborate with alternating decoration of flowers and pearls. They wear a series of neck ornaments, bangles and anklet, all made of pearls. The waist girdles are also of pearls, with a long chain that hangs down from the navel. They are fair, golden yellow and red complexioned respectively. Their lower garments are also given similar colour treatment like that of their complexion. All of them wear a shawl, running over the shoulders and breasts, which is of very narrow width, dark in colour and decorated with floral motifs. The tasteful ornamentation (*bushana*) of these queens makes one wonder about the extraordinary sense of fashion among the members of the royal house. In a sense, the painter corroborated the long list of jewellery of pearls and other precious stones recorded in the inscription, are nothing but a statement of truth.

The Hall of Āḍavallāṇ

The great cosmic dance is taking place in the larger and taller hall, attached to which is a lateral smaller hall where the king along with his principal queens are offering their worship. The architectural design is akin to that of a modern day temple at Chidambaram. A thick band indicates the floor level of the larger hall, where Āḍavallāṇ is performing the dance. It is a four-pillared hall surmounted by a vaulted-roof of tiles. Since the sanctum is shown in profile, only two of its pillars are shown which are simple, cylindrical without any capital. The representation of Āḍavallāṇ and other gods as mentioned earlier are set within this framework of pillars. The vaulted roof of this hall has been laid with tiles, canopied by nine *kalaśas*. The lower portion of its brim is decorated with festoonery. Judging from the colour it was obviously covered with gold.

The Prākāra

In the open-courtyard, a shrine for Chaṇḍikēśa (?) is depicted. The whole complex is shown bound by a two-tiered *mālīka* all round, except in the foreground. The *mālīka* is decorated for the visit of the king, with curtains tied and hanging between the pillars and festoonery. There are at least three, if not four, entrances to the complex in the cardinal

directions. The entrances on one of the sides, and the one depicted in the foreground are closed, while the major entrance at the far end, (depicted on the top of the panel) is open. The periphery wall, shown in full on the top of the panel, is compressed on the sides to the width of the offset, so much so, it looks like an ornamental band, rather than a graphic depiction of a grand feature. The entourage of the king are dispersed within and outside the temple in an orderly fashion.

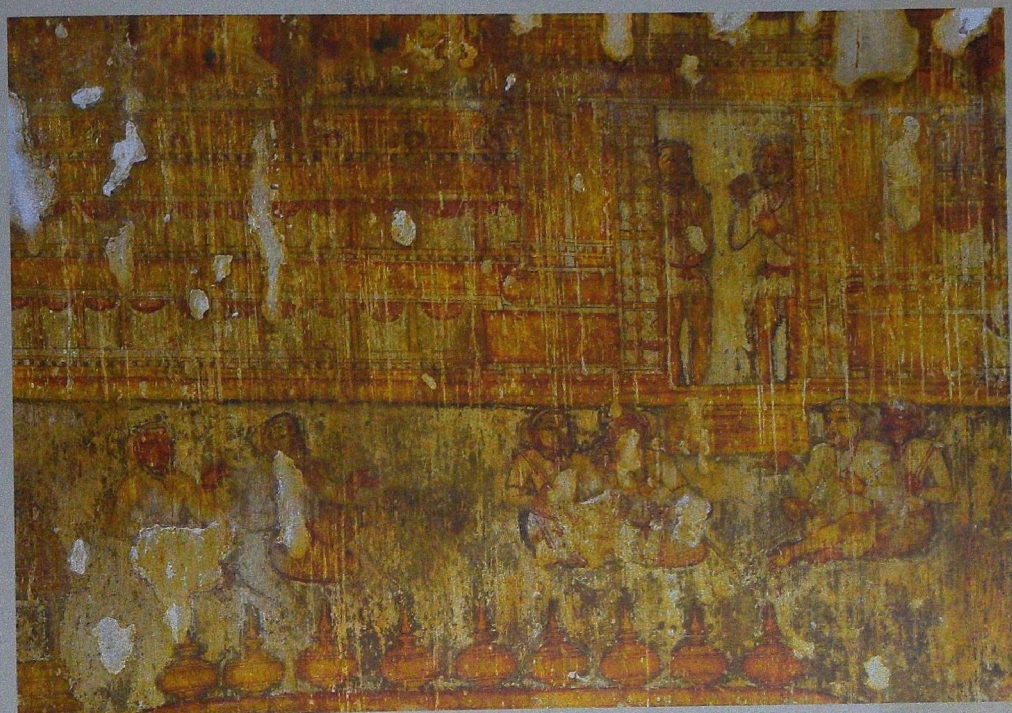
The Royal Women

Attracting the immediate attention of the viewer is a group of eight royal women accompanying the king. They are seated behind the sanctum and engaged in conversation. By their extraordinary attire, it takes a mere glance to surmise that they are royal women. Their personal ornamentation, though inferior to that of the queens accompanying the king, still includes elaborate flower decorated coiffeur, a variety of pearl jewellery including necklaces, armlets, bangles. A shawl of narrow width is thrown across their shoulders and over their robust breasts. All of them are engaged in excited conversation amongst themselves.

The painter excelled in depicting this group. By bringing a variety to their attire, he reflects the sense of fashion prevalent among the royal women of the Chōla period. Second, the painter's acumen and observation of human behaviour and body language comes to the fore in the postures that he has assigned to each one of them. The first woman, looks a bit old and dark complexioned, is not interested in any discussion with other members. She is looking away from rest of the group, and perhaps chanting some verses. The second and fourth women, yellow complexioned, overflowing with youthful



Royal women



Śiva bhaktas

exuberance are conversing among them. The third woman, is seated behind the row. The impression one gains is that she is not interested in the conversation between the other two. The copper-green complexioned middle-aged fifth woman is engaged in conversation with the golden yellow complexioned sixth woman, seated with her back turned to the group. The seventh and eighth women, both young but of different complexions, are discussing perhaps the greatness of the Lord between themselves. A gentle breeze, which was flowing across the open courtyard of the complex, blows away their soft and silky shawls as they flutter away from their bodies. The painter has infused an extraordinary amount of aesthetic quality and variety into the figures, something one has to observe keenly to understand and appreciate.

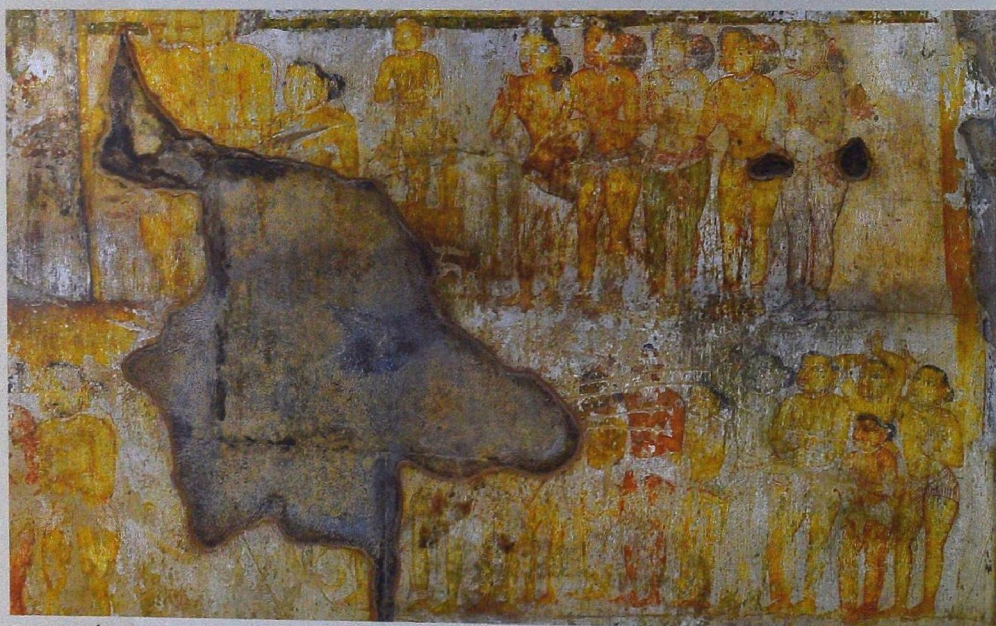
Śiva Bhaktas

There are eight *Śiva bhaktas*, seated in four pairs in the open courtyard away from the royal ladies. Four of them, in two pairs, are shown seated opposite each other, just in front of the rear entrance of the complex. The other pair of devotees are seated slightly away. All of them are engaged in intense conversation about the ecstasy of the cosmic dance of the

Lord. The pair of devotees to the left of the panel seems to have proposed some finer thoughts about the blissful dance. This is being discussed between the other pair of devotees seated in front of them. The pair of devotees seated slightly away, look as though they had accepted the proposition. All these men are similarly attired in strings of *rudrāksha* seeds worn round the neck and biceps, wearing a white overcoat without collars and a lower garment. All of them hold a staff. The expression on their faces is accentuated by the position of their eyeballs, they radiate peace obtained through their deep meditative and intuitive lifestyles. There are two similarly clad persons standing just outside the doorway in a similar attitude of animated conversation.

The King's Entourage

In the open courtyard, in front of the sanctum, there are several common devotees standing in rows, worshipping the Lord, with folded hands held either near the chest or above the head in complete reverence. They are privileged enough to be within the complex. A man among them has brought his two young children. There is also a group of common women in simple attire. It seems that one of them is pregnant, brilliantly indicated by a gently protruding tummy. There is another row of devotees, depicted in two groups on either side of the *gōpura*. In sum, the Chōla painter had presented here a graphic representation of a section of commoners of the Chōla period. This depiction is



Common devotees

ample testimony of the skill of the painter who could observe and depict accurately both the royal and common womenfolk.

Within the complex of the temple, other members, Brahmanas, and higher officials of the king's entourage are standing on either side of the halls. There is a group of Brahmanas, standing next to the sanctum with folded hands (*añjali*). Some of the king's high officials (or the bodyguards of the king?), wearing the usual white jacket, white turbaned headgear and daggers obediently inserted in the waist belt are wondering at the solemnity and intensity of the occasion, while others are simply leaning onto their sticks.

The Entourage Outside the Precincts

The visit of the king to the temple was an occasion for celebration. Obviously, a large contingent followed him. The restricted space within the temple precincts is not sufficient for the large number of officials, servants and commoners accompanying the king. Many had to stay outside the *prākāra*. The painter depicts them on the offsets projecting immediately from the main recess. A group of people who are gathered nearer to the left side of the panel are in a merry mood at the arrival of their king. Hence, they clash on the large cymbals and one of them is beating a large drum (*maddhaḷam*). There is a pair of elephants with their mahout astride. The two colleagues in the stables of the king are in deep conversation about the trip to Chidambaram.

To the right side of the panel, on the top of the broader offset, is a depiction of a ritual cot in a room of an adjacent structure, the significance of which cannot be determined. Below it are three high-ranking officials, who wear the typical white dress and covered head. They carry a short dagger, secured in the waistband. In the third segment, a servant holds together a group of horses, at least five of them. All the horses are well decorated indicating that they are from the royal stables. It is not certain whether the horses are yoked to a chariot or not.

The Royal Women on the Doorjamb

There are brilliantly executed figures of royal women on the doorjamb located in between this and the next chamber and on the broader offset beyond the jamb. It is very difficult to ascertain whether these figures formed a part of the composition of the *Āḍavallān* panel. The upper half of the jamb was cleared of the palimpsest *Nāyaka* layer to reveal the *Chōla* layer of paintings consisting of two royal women, standing next to each other. One of them, red complexioned, is holding a small bowl filled with flowers in her right hand. Her left hand is placed gently on her waist. The other woman is yellow complexioned and shown holding a stick-like object over her left shoulder. Both the women glow, as they are radiantly bejewelled with pearls, and perhaps moving towards the temple of *Āḍavallān*.

The subsequent offset is technically located in the next chamber. Utilising the entire height of the offset, the painter had depicted two pairs of royal women in it. One of them is singing and clashing small cymbals to keep rhythm. The other is keenly listening. Both are adorned with exquisite jewellery, typical of Chōla royal women. The other pair of women too is in a state of animated conversation amongst themselves. All these depictions are incredibly outstanding and clearly speak of the skill of Chōla painter.

Rājarāja or Chēramān?

Having seen the contents of this panel in detail, there are at least two significant things that require detailed discussion. The foremost being the identification of the king who is offering worship. One such identification proposes that it is Chēramān's visit to the Kōyil (Chidambaram temple) which is depicted here, and not that of Rājarāja.²³ The argument is based primarily on the very simple and minimal attire of the principal figure, and she assumes that royal figures must be appropriately dressed for an event like this. It was pointed out elsewhere that Rājarāja was an enlightened person with extreme devotion to Natarāja. Therefore, expecting Rājarāja to be depicted in full royal attire in the murals perhaps reflects a contradiction on its own, as it goes against the level of spiritual attainment he professes through various means. Then again, merely based on a similarity in the tufted figures, the alternate identification was proposed. On scrutiny, certain differences emerge. The painter was careful enough to mark out such conspicuous differences in the depiction of these two tufted figures. The tufted figure in the Sundarar panel could only be Chēramān and there could be no different opinion about this identification. The portrayal of Chēramān occurs at two places in the same panel, astride his horse and seated in obedience in Kailāsa. While on the horse, he is shown with a tuft, which is decorated with flowers. The shape of the tuft is also cylindrical unlike the bun-like shape shown here. He also wears jewellery of pearls on the neck, arms and legs. In order to signify his status as Nāyanmār, he is depicted with a string of *rudrākshas* around the neck. In the next depiction too at Kailāsa, his tuft is painted with flowers and jewellery in addition to *rudrāksha*.

On the other hand, Rājarāja is depicted at three places, once in this panel and twice in the opposite panel to this, features of which will be discussed next. Everywhere, the depiction is similar with a tuft, but without flower decorations, no jewellery except for a closely fitting beaded (*sphaṭika*) neck ornament. He does not wear *rudrākshas*. Therefore, the jewellery and *rudrāksha* are the two key features that set apart the Chēramān figures from that of Rājarāja. Again, the young figure depicted in Chamber 10 could not be Rājarāja for the same reason as mentioned earlier and for other reasons, which will be discussed in the relevant context. Chēramān did visit Tillai. However, to say that the entourage

depicted in the panel belongs to Chēra country, just because of the elephants in it, is also equally unacceptable. Similarly, wearing a bush-shirt like an overcoat need not be ascribed exclusively to Chēra country. It will be shown, while discussing the panel opposite to this one, that the Chōla officials are depicted with 'bush-shirts'. Having elephants in the retinue need not be the exclusive privilege of a Chēra king, for even the Chōla king could have one. Unfortunately, the waiting horses have not been taken into account, while interpreting the panel. The devotion exhibited by Rājarāja was equally intensive as that of Chēramān. Therefore, he would depict himself worshipping his tutelary deity rather than Chēramān, who had already found a place in another panel. Therefore, the figure worshipping the Āḍavallāṇ is none other but Rājarāja.

Architectural Features of the Ancient Kōyil

The second aspect worthy of note is that the ancient form of the temple at Chidambaram. It was not far different from the present form, in spite of the fact that it had undergone extensive renovations in the twelfth century and since then periodically.²⁴ As of today, there were two shrines having a similar roofing pattern when Rājarāja visited there. Of the two, according to the painting, the abode of Naṭarāja is proportionately larger and lower than the other hall, from where Rājarāja is offering worship. The pillars of the sanctum are cylindrical, plain without any capital members, and those of the other hall have capital members with the usual mouldings. Both the roofs are gilded externally with gold (gold and copper today). The number of *stūpis* placed on the roof varies, nine for the sanctum and seven for the other structure.

There was a shrine for Chaṇḍikēśa within the courtyard. The plan of this shrine, as inferred from the depiction, is conventional with a *garbha-griha* and a *mukha-maṇḍapa*, with the elevation up to *prastara* portion is the same as commonly found in early Chōla stone temples. However, the roof is similar to that of the shrine of Naṭarāja, which is interesting. The depiction of Chaṇḍikēśa in the *kōshṭha*, which helps in the identification of this shrine, is quite feebly visible. There is a double-storied *mālika* along the *prākāra*. This unit is shown prominently in appropriate proportions on top of the panel. It is continued on the smaller offsets, in a compressed proportion to look like an ornamental band. In the foreground, it was omitted for unknown reasons. Therefore, only three arms of the *prākāra* are depicted. There are three easily identifiable *gōpura-dvāras*, one in the arm depicted on the upper portion of the panel, the other on the broader offset on the right of the panel, and the third standing isolated in the foreground, overlapping onto the thick ochre band at the bottom. The doors of the *gōpura-dvāra* on the top are open and the rest are closed. The conspicuous tiled *kapōṭas* of the *gōpuras* led to the belief of Chēra influence in this panel.²⁵ This particular observation requires further research as there is

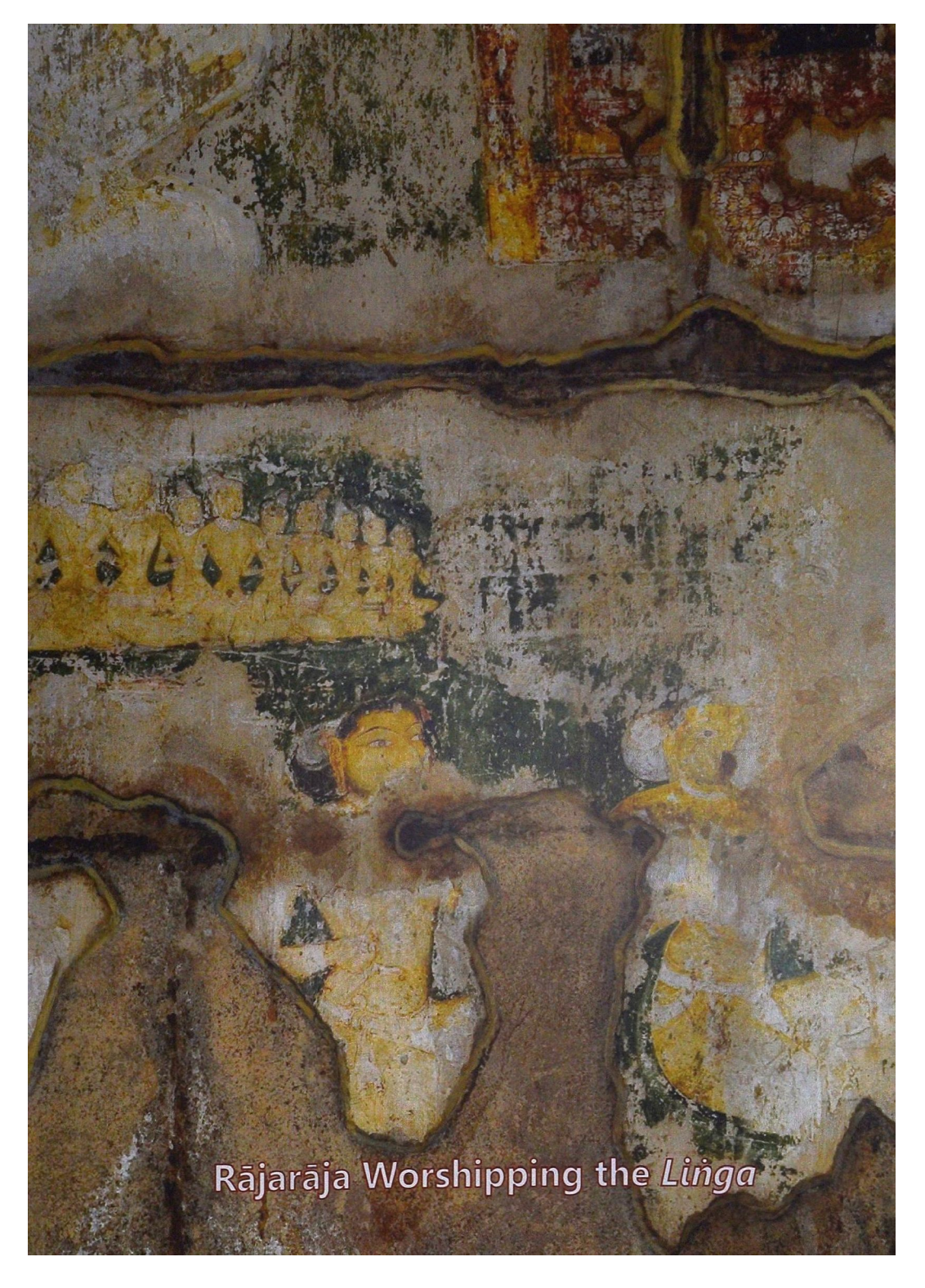
a wealth of information about the contemporary architecture within the murals. It should be interpreted as a contemporary architectural element found in the structures of Chōla country, which the painters had faithfully copied.

Other Significant Features

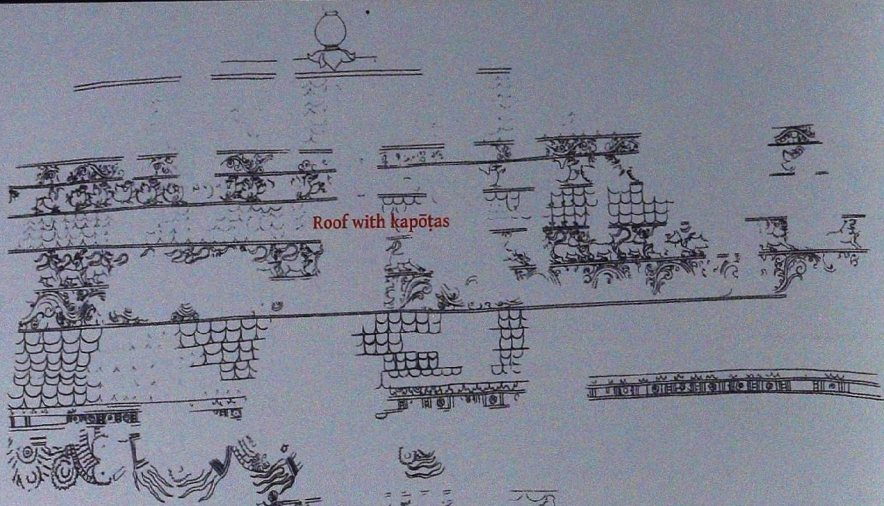
This panel is significant for several other features. The painter did not depict Rājarāja in the usual *añjali* posture. On the other hand, Rājarāja directly performs worship by offering flowers to the presiding deity even though priests (the traditional *Tillai vāl anthaṇarkaḷ*?) are depicted within the precincts. Another aspect worthy of note is the positioning of Umā on the right of Śiva which is a deviation from the prescribed left side. This was executed deliberately, perhaps as a painter's prerogative, as he felt no one must come between his lord, the king, who was also his patron, and the Lord of all beings, whom the patron revered the most.

The Chōla painter has also added another fine touch to this composition, as he tries to contrast the attires of the members of royalty, the simplicity of the king *vis-a-vis* his queens with magnificent attire and jewellery, clearly indicates that Rājarāja desired to be depicted as an ordinary devotee and servitor in front of the Almighty. This aptly fits the title of *Śivapādaśēkhara* that he assumed.

While the execution of the figures reflects the extraordinary skill of the painter, one cannot at the same time fail to observe certain deviations he made in the depiction of the structures. To cite one, he chose not to draw a pillar of the *maṇḍapa*, in which the king is standing. If the pillar had to be painted it would have to be drawn in front of the figure of the king, thus obscuring him from view. Obviously, the painter had chosen not to depict the pillar so that the figure of the king could be in full view. Further, the whole complex and the activities happening inside were brilliantly transformed into a profile view. He could have adopted a perspective view of the whole depiction, which would have resulted in loss of importance to the depictions of the Lord and the king. Therefore, not to lose on this count, he transformed the whole into a profile view. The attempt indeed resulted in extraordinary success, as the whole portrayal itself is very pleasing and arresting.



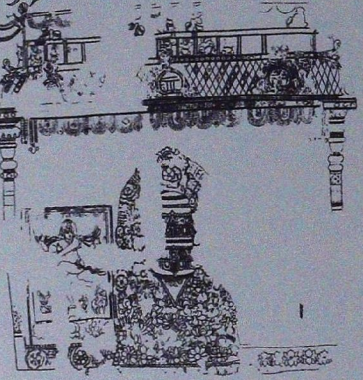
Rājarāja Worshipping the *Linga*



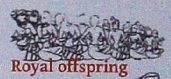
Roof with kapōṭas



Rājarāja Worshipping the Lhiga



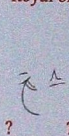
The great exposition



Royal offspring



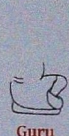
Queens



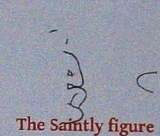
Rājendra



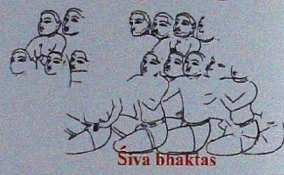
Rājarāja



Guru



The Saintly figure



Śiva bhaktas



Royal women

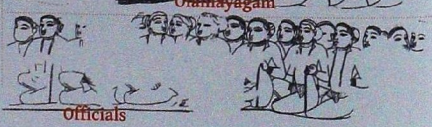


Senāpati

Passage



Omkāyegam



Officials

4. Rājarāja Worshipping the Liṅga

This panel is located in Chamber 9 on the wall opposite to the earlier described panel in which the king is shown worshipping the Āḍavallāṇ. Only patches of it were visible earlier²⁶ which invited some passing references from those who had an opportunity to visit the gallery from time to time. A patch of brilliantly executed depiction of women invited the attention of all, but none were able collate the figures to identify the theme. One such reference was by S.R. Balasubrahmanyam who assigns the panel to the Chōla period and states that it was “much damaged and worn out; however rows of dancing figures are discernible as, also a miniature Nataraja (?)”.²⁷ This is an interesting observation, perhaps made when the panel was not fully exposed. Sivaramamurti exclaims at the great beauty of Chōla women.²⁸ Nagaswamy wonders at the miniature figures and what they depict (*enna kathaiyo?* meaning what a story!).²⁹ Champakalakshmi was nearer to the correct identification that it was an assembly of courtiers and others.³⁰

Sadly, this panel is severely damaged, particularly, in the lower portion. The upper portion too has suffered extensive superficial damage with the pigment layer abraded and missing, leaving only the outlines of figures visible. An appreciable amount of imagination is required on the part of the observer to collate the figures and understand the theme depicted in this panel. Repeated examination of the documentation in a digitally enhanced mode led to a slightly different interpretation, other than the popular identification. In fact, the panel depicts two different events. The accepted and easier identification of Rājarāja worshipping the *liṅga* before its installation in the sanctum occupies the upper portion. The other depiction - a momentous exposition of a religiously significant theme being delivered by a saintly person to an audience which comprised of the king and his entire royal retinue including his guru, son, wives, other children, royal ladies, his officials of several ranks besides some *bhaktas* is in the lower portion. A comprehensive description of this panel, from the top to bottom, is given as follows before interpreting its significance.

Upper Portion: The Hall Where the King Worships the Liṅga

As mentioned earlier, the two different incidents - the king worshipping the *liṅga* and the saint expounding a theme- are taking place in the same palatial mansion. The mansion is indicated in profile by its massive *kapōṭa* along the entire width of the panel. The *kapōṭa* rises in three levels, with an intervening decorated moulding between each level. The bottom and the topmost levels are broader while the middle level is narrow. A series of *stūpis*, probably gilded in gold, are set closely to one another on the summit. The most



Rājaraṇja Worshipping the Linga, full view



Rājarāja Worshipping the Liṅga, detail of the religious exposition



Rājarāja Worshipping the Liṅga, detail of Rājarāja Worshipping the Liṅga



Rājarāja Worshipping the Linga, details of the royal persons

significant feature of the *kapōṭas* is that they are externally tiled and rise in three levels, having clerestory in between.

The clerestories between the levels are relieved brilliantly with bold bands of creeper design (*patra-lāṭa*), picked out in brilliant yellow ochre on a black background. Between other levels are *iha-mṛga vari* and a *haṁsa-vari*. The mythical animals set in the above frieze are depicted in a playful mood with wide open eyes. Their long tails are up and some of the animals are shown teasing the animal in front with their forelegs. Alternatively, the animals look front and back. The *haṁsas* are fluttering their wings and look back and forth in a frolicking mood. The brim is decorated with festoonery consisting of garlands of flowers and cylindrical cloth ribbons and banners flowing gently in the strong breeze. This arrangement of *kapōṭas* clearly indicates that the palatial building had a massive roof. All the activities described as follows are taking place within this building.

The Inner Maṇḍapa

An ornate four pillared, flat-roofed *maṇḍapa* was erected within the above hall. The prominent *kapōṭa* of the inner *maṇḍapa* is relieved with a cross-lattice pattern and gilded in gold. The lower brim of the *kapōṭa* is decorated with interconnected festooneries and colourful ribbons, flowing strongly in a divine ambience. A number of figures of *nandi* are placed in a series over the flat roof. It may be recalled here that similar decoration is adopted over the *prākāra* of this temple.



Detail of *kapōṭas*, note the *stūpis*

Liṅga

The inner *maṇḍapa* was erected with a specific purpose to house the massive *liṅga*, which was to be installed in the sanctum of the Rājarājēśvaram. The massive *liṅga* is well decorated, with a gold shield (*kavacha*) covering it. The gold-shield is embellished with bands of precious stones (*ratna-paṭṭas*), from which beaded festooneries are hanging. An extensive flower arrangement, consisting of several strings of garlands, is placed over the margin of the shaft. A huge heap of free flowers, like lotuses and lilies, has fallen below indicating the performance of extensive *pūjā*. The fallen flowers completely cover the bottom of the *liṅga*. It may be not be out of context here to suggest that the shape and proportion, in which the flowers are drawn, suggests that the *yōni-piṭha* is absent²¹. Placed next to the *liṅga* is an image of Naṭarāja.

Painting of Naṭarāja

The depiction of this Naṭarāja is more or less similar to the magnificent Naṭarāja mentioned earlier. Subtle differences are there, like the depiction of Dēvī painted to the usual left of the Naṭarāja. However, the significance lies in the fact that it is a depiction of a framed painting of the god. A beaded frame, gilded with gold and embedded with precious stones, is provided all round the canvas. The painter was able to infuse a bit of naturalness by inclining the depiction of the framed painting, to suggest that it was kept casually. It is pertinent to understand the reason to depict a framed painting within a painting. The answer is simple. Rājarāja, being an ardent devotee of Naṭarāja (*Āḍavallāṇ*) in all



Rājarāja worshipping the Liṅga, note the painting of Naṭarāja by the side of liṅga

probability was having a painted image as his personal object of daily worship. Therefore, when he worshiped the *liṅga* before its installation in the sanctum, Rājarāja must have been very particular to have his personal image of Naṭarāja too along with the *liṅga*. Since this is a depiction of an event witnessed by the painter, he has portrayed it truly when executing the mural.

Rājarāja and Others

Rājarāja is shown seated, majestically outside the *maṇḍapa*, offering his prayers to the *liṅga* with folded hands. Though the painting here is worn out considerably with the pigments gone, the lines remain clearly. It is not difficult to identify the figure as Rājarāja. He is shown in a relatively large proportion to indicate his prominence, a technique already noted in the previous panel. It is very similar to the figure of the Rājarāja depicted in the opposite panel. While the face with a large moustache and a mildly grown beard is noticeable, the body portion is damaged leaving only the outline. The pigments have disappeared, leaving behind patches of golden hue here and there. The hairdo is also similar, with the hair tied into a thick tuft at the back. Behind him, in the portion which is mostly worn out, there are traces of the depictions of his three principal queens, shown seated. They are yellow, green and red complexioned. Their slender bodies are gracefully attenuated at the waist. It seems that dance was a concomitant feature during the course of worship. Therefore, on the other side of the *maṇḍapa*, three female dancers are shown dancing in a brilliant and synchronised posture.

Further up, to the left of the *maṇḍapa*, seated in a row are more persons. Since the painting here is very much roughened, the details of the figures are very faintly visible; the only feature discernible is their richly designed lower garments, perhaps indicating their high status. In all probability, they may be the higher officials of the king because similarly clad figures could be firmly identified as officials in the bottom portion of the panel. The above description clearly indicates that this part, even in a poor state of preservation, is very easy to identify as the king worshipping the *liṅga* of this temple before installation.

Lower Portion: A Religious Exposition

The painting below the above depiction has suffered maximum damage. In the preserved portion, a motley group of persons are painted, which lead to the interpretation that they were assembled to witness the above mentioned event. In fact, it is different. This portion of the panel portrays a very significant event which happened in the life of the king. A religious discourse is being delivered by a saintly figure, who is seated centrally in the gathering. The entire royal court including the guru, the king, his son Rājendra, his principal queens, royal women, higher officials besides *bhaktas* of the saint, are all seated

in a hierarchical manner and are paying rapt attention to the seer. They are seated in two groups, on either side of the saintly figure, leaving a clear space between them. To the right of the saint are the royal members, and to the left are the commoners. The two groups are facing each other. Considering the significance of the painting, a comprehensive description of it is furnished as follows before venturing into any kind of analysis, or study of the panel.

The Saintly Figure

At the centre of this congregation is a saintly figure. Unfortunately, the left side of it alone has survived the ravages of time for study. He is red-complexioned. His head is cleanly shaven. He is seated in a peculiar posture, cross-legged, with the torso turned to face the viewer and legs to his left. He holds his left hand near his chest. It is difficult to ascertain the exact posture of the hand, as the painting is highly damaged. Interestingly, an appreciable amount of space around him is left vacant. This is in contrast to the tendency of the Chōlā painter to crowd the composition with figures in all available spaces while composing the theme. Therefore, it indicates that the saintly figure was held in high reverence.

There is a central nave in front of the saintly figure. A congregation of persons are shown seated to his left and right in an orderly manner. There are four rows of royal members seated on the right side. The first row is drawn at the same level of the saintly figure indicating that those occupying this row are equal to him in status. Immediately, to the right of the saintly figure, at an appreciable distance, is a person, pale-yellow complexioned, seated cross-legged on a cushion and facing the saint. Only the lower portion of his body is preserved, his slim, long legs are clearly visible. He wears a lower garment, which is white in colour and is tied around the waist like a bath-towel. Since he is



(From right to left) The Saintly figure, Guru, Rājarāja and Rājēndra

seated immediately to the right of the central figure, he seems to enjoy the position of great importance in the hierarchy of the assembled, next only to the central figure.

Rājarāja, Rājendra and Other Members of the Royal Family

The figure seated second in the row can easily be identified, as Rājarāja. The depiction is very similar to that of the king in the upper portion of this panel. He sports a lower garment. The *uttariya* is tied around his waist as a mark of his utmost respect. He also wears a closely fitting neck ornament of a string of beads (*sphaṭika?*). The face is not clearly visible, but the long eyes, bent eyebrows, possibly a moustache and beard, long earlobes, with the characteristic hairdo of a large tuft are easily discernible, and are akin to the depiction of the king in the upper portion. All these characteristics make the identification of this figure more acceptable, crucial to identify all the other figures in this arrangement.

Next to him is another male, contrastingly modelled with a youthful and radiant face. There is a delicate line to suggest a beard. The eyebrows are bent like a rainbow, so are the eyes, all radiating a youthful appearance. He too wears simple attire similar to Rājarāja. His right hand is shown in *suchi hasta*, as if he is exclaiming at the greatness of the exposition.³² If the identification of the previous figure is that of Rājarāja, then there is no doubt that this one is his son Rājendra. Rājendra must be an energetic man when his father was building this temple, as he outlived his father by about thirty years.

The painting is completely damaged, denying us an opportunity for any kind of reasonable identification of persons seated next to Rājendra. Gauging by the extent of the damaged portion of the painting, there must have been at least two more persons depicted here. Further, in the row there are three female figures depicted, of which two can be identified with reasonable certainty. The traces are clinching enough to identify them as



The Royal offspring

the three principal queens' of Rājārāja. The first queen is red complexioned and wears a red *sāri* decorated with floral motifs which have been executed individually. A broad and richly ornate girdle adorns her waist. She too keeps her right hand in the same gesture (*suchi hasta*). The next queen is light yellow complexioned. She sports a *sāri* with a striped design, a similar waist girdle and the usual narrow shawl is worn around the breasts. The face, even in the damaged condition of the painting, is beautiful and serene. Beyond this, the painting is completely damaged, leaving only faint lines to represent the third queen. Identifying them as the principal queens of the king is not difficult, as the painter has clearly depicted them similarly in the opposite panel.

A group of individuals, fourteen in all, are depicted in the available space above. They are seated shoulder to shoulder in two rows. The group includes four to five women and the gender of the rest is difficult to identify, but likely to be male. The technique of execution of this group is rather confusing, because the figures progressively decrease in size, often confused for a perspective view. However, a sensible interpretation is that the larger figures were older ones and the smaller ones are younger. If so, this group constitutes older women and young children. In all probability and taking into consideration their hierarchical descent in size, it is safe to identify this group of persons as the offspring of the king and his son. The depiction corresponds to the information from the Chōla inscriptions, which records several daughters of Rājārāja, at least six of them and many sons of Rājendra, and as many as three of whom ruled the country. Because of their exalted position, as royal progeny, they were allotted locations proximal to the king, and they were consciously excluded from other royal women. They were also not to be seated in the same row along with the king. Therefore, identifying this group as the children of the king and co-ruler looks more convincing.

Other Women of the Royal Household

Below this row of highest-ranking royal dignitaries, are the other women of the royal household, seated in three rows. They are of exceptional beauty, not to say, exuberantly dressed befitting their status! Unfortunately, this portion of the painting has mostly disappeared, leaving behind only a few patches. Even in this fragmentary state of preservation, it is possible for the viewer to appreciate the beauty and sense of fashion of Chōla royal women.

These small fragments speak volumes about the extraordinary care taken by the Chōla women in adorning themselves with a variety of costumes. The diversity of hairdo's, fully bedecked in flowers is pleasing. The patterns of the lower garments worn by them are diverse, with different base colours overlaid with dissimilar designs consisting of stripes, both single and multiples, thin and thick, white and black, besides floral designs. This

portrayal stands, at the same time, as evidence of the skill of the weaver, tastes of the womenfolk of the Chōla period and the observational skills of the painter. The rendering of one of the women, even in fragmentary state, attracts attention. While her right hand is kept in the *suchi hasta* like all others, the left is placed on her knees, with the fingers cautiously spread apart. A closer look reveals that her nails are long and well manicured with some kind of a natural polish. It is a common reflex action of women having long nails to keep their fingers apart, lest they break. The painter had observed this behaviour and copied it faithfully while painting. Even in the fragmentary state of preservation, these portions look magnificent.

The Officials in Three Rows

Commoners are seated on the other side, to the left of the seated seer, and facing the royal members, leaving an aisle in between, which is not aligned exactly to the central figure. This portion too is severely damaged. Nevertheless, quite a few features could be discerned. Corresponding to the three rows of royal women, there are three rows of commoners, and all of them are men. In the lowermost row, there are fifteen persons. There could be more in this row but this portion of the panel is heavily damaged. All the men have a variety of physical attributes. There are persons with black (three), golden yellow (seven), red (three), and green (two) body hues. They are all seated in a cramped manner perhaps due to the shortage of space, as the painter had to depict quite a few of them within a small area. Their attire is simple. They wear a kind of an open shirt. Their lower garment is plain and tied around the waist, while in a few instances it is decorated with stripes, or a checked design. They wear a white open shirt, complete with sleeves, cuffs and a broad collar. It is quite long and covers up to their thighs. Their hairdo is similar for all, with hair tied in a massive tuft behind the head and covered invariably with a white cloth. All of them sport a white neckband made of cloth or intertwined threads fitting the neck closely. They are all seated in the normal cross-legged posture, with their left hand in the typical *suchi hasta*, while the posture of the right hand is difficult to determine. All, but one, are looking towards the aisle in rapt attention to the exposition.

In the middle row, about eight persons could be identified. This row is less crowded. Of the eight discernible figures, six are seated next to each other. Their attire exhibits remarkably varied patterns, indicating the disparity in status between the persons of this row and those accommodated in the bottom row, where the lower garment is plain. The first three persons from the aisle of this row are carrying a bundle of long palm-leaves, tucked under the armpit against the body. The upper garment of the first person is an elaborate, long, full-sleeved coat, open in the middle but closed at the leg by an overlap. It is vividly decorated with closely spaced green circular designs leaving an annular space

around. Similarly, the lower garment too is decorated with a crosschecked pattern. Obviously, he is the highest ranked person among this group. The next two people seated after him, though having a bundle of palm-leaves tucked similarly, wear a simpler dress. The others in the row are provided with simpler attire.

Almost all the figures in the upper row, and immediately to the left of the saintly figure, are either damaged or highly mutilated beyond any recognition. The person seated in front of the saintly figure looks to be the highest ranked among commoners, because he was accorded a seat very near to the saintly figure. Even though his face is completely obliterated, it is easy to observe the richness of his lower garment. In the preserved portion, the blade of a sword is clearly visible. The sword is held across his lap in reverence from right to left with the pointed tip facing the floor. Obviously, he is a very high ranked person, privileged to keep his sword as a symbol of his status, even during this august occasion.

They are indeed members of the Chōla bureaucracy. The epigraphs provide an excellent picture about the structure of the Chōla bureaucracy, which was definitely hierarchical. Correspondingly, the status among the figures is clearly indicated by the dress they are wearing. For example, the lower row officials wear very simple clothes and had to fight for their seats. In the second row, the figures in front are wearing ornamental dresses while those seated far away are simple. But the row is more spacious. The upper row is damaged, but their highest rank is well and truly indicated by the sword the first person holds.



The officials of the Chōla bureaucracy

Chōla records refer to hierarchy of officials like the *Perundaram* and *Sirutaram* and a mixed level of *Sirudanattu Perundaram*.³³ The bottom row, in all probability represents the mixed class of both the *Sirudanattu Perundaram* and the *Sirutaram*. The first three persons in the middle row, seated next to the aisle, fit the description of the *Tirumandira-ōlai* and *ōlaināyakam*, the sets of officials who took down verbal orders of the king for communication down the ranks. The elaborate decorative over-robe they are wearing and the thick bundle of palm leaves they are carrying tucked under their arms fits their status and designation as *Tirumandira-ōlai* and *ōlaināyakam*. Even at this religious discourse, they are duty bound and ready to copy down orders. It may be recalled here that the inscriptions engraved in the temple provides a long list of officials by their proper names and their designations. Obviously, it is very difficult to synchronise the list with those depicted here. However, it is very easy to identify the person seated in front of the central saintly figure. As mentioned earlier, he is shown with a sword, which is sufficient to identify him as Krishṇan Rāman, who was a *Senāpati* and a very close confidante of the king. He had the authority to carry a sword even to this august gathering, and was equal to the king in wealth as he constructed the *prākāra* wall all round the temple, which is almost equal to the main *vimāna* in volume.

Above this group of officials, are a group of Śiva *bhaktas*, of which thirteen are clearly visible. Their attire is very simple, consisting of a lower garment only. They are seated in two rows with an extraordinary expression of wonder on their faces engrossed in the soul stirring spiritual exposition by the saintly figure. Each of them has been given a complexion different from one another (two black, three dark red and the rest in golden yellow). The ash smeared on the forehead of a few figures is also visible. Some, clashing the cymbals, play along with the saintly figure and singing in praise of the Lord. Here again, the Chōla painter displays his dexterity, as against all other painters of ancient Indian schools, in bringing variety to even a simple group of faces, not only by differentiating the execution of the lines and hues, but also in the introduction of different facial expressions in them. This group is at a slight distance from the saintly figure, who is delivering the discourse.

The Identification of the Theme and its Significance

The description provided earlier establishes beyond any doubt that the panel depicts two different incidents, the worshipping of the *liṅga* by the king, and the discourse by an eminent servitor. These two incidents might have taken place just one after the other, and at the same venue. The identification of the upper portion of the panel is easy as Rājārāja worshipping the *liṅga* (*Rājārājisvaramuḍaiyār*). It is likely that the *liṅga* was established in a temporary pillared *maṇḍapa*, which was erected within a massive hall,

where a huge congregation could take place. It may be recalled that the king records in one of the inscriptions that he worshipped the deity with golden flowers, made from the booty of the wars with the Chālukyan king. Perhaps, this depiction can be equated to this reference.³⁴ In this panel, an interesting point worthy of note is the placement of a framed painting of Naṭarāja, which was, perhaps a personal object of worship of the king.

It may not be out of place here to state that there are number of relief sculptures, carved on the walls of Chōla temples depicting some royal persons worshipping a *liṅga*. Of this, the reliefs at Tiruvissainallur and Konerirajapuram are inscribed. The modelling of the royal person with a huge tuft and a beard is akin to the figure of Rājarāja. Significantly, the images are without any royal paraphernalia like a *maṭṭa* or extensive ornamentation. Among them, a relief at Konerirajapuram, the king is identified as Gaṇḍarāditya and is worshipping the image of Naṭarāja. Gaṇḍarāditya was an ardent devotee of Naṭarāja and had composed a *Tiruvisaippā* on Chidambaram. Several such reliefs, similar in pattern with a figure worshipping the *liṅga*, have been noticed. They are carved as bas-reliefs or in low relief in the circular space in the *tōraṇā*, over the niches or in the *kuḍu* motifs located along the brim of the *śikhara*.

The lower part of the panel is even more noteworthy. A saintly figure is shown delivering a discourse, which is the focus for all assembled there. Every individual is very engrossed in the exposition of the saintly figure. Since the painter, obviously at the behest of Rājarāja, had chosen to depict this particular event along with his worshiping of the *liṅga*, these two incidents must be of equal importance and related to each other. Significantly, the discourse by the saintly person also takes place in the same venue, possibly in front of the *liṅga*, which was to be the presiding deity of his *magnum opus* construction and Naṭarāja, his own personal deity. Therefore, this discourse becomes all the more important. It cannot be held as just another religious address.

The whole incident revolves around the saintly figure seated in the middle and who was apparently an extraordinary religious personality. The painter has left an appreciable amount of space all round the figure unpainted, to indicate his exalted position and great eminence as per the decorum to be maintained by the august gathering of persons of a very high stature, both empirically and spiritually. However, the crux of the problem is the identification of this figure with known historical persons, who were contemporaries of Rājarāja. As described earlier the centrality of the saintly figure in the depiction is beyond any doubt. That, a hierarchy was followed in the seating arrangement of the persons is also apparent. By the principle of representing the same person in an identical manner, it is easy to identify the second person seated to the right of the saintly central person, as none other than Rājarāja. Therefore, in the hierarchy, there are two persons above the king.

Historically, three such personalities could have enjoyed that status. They are Karuvūr Dēvar, probably the preceptor of Rājārāja, 'gurukka!' Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita and Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi, who is credited with the compilation of the hymns of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar into seven *Tirumuṟais* during the rule of Rājārāja.

Karuvūr Dēvar is the author of a decade of verses on this temple, which are included in the *Tiruvisaippā*, the ninth *Tirumuṟai*. There is another set of ten hymns by Karuvūr Dēvar (the same, or another person?) on the Gaṅgai temple, built some four decades later. If he was indeed the *guru* of the king or even an important person associated with the temple and the king, then there is every chance of his name being mentioned in the inscriptions along with a hundred or more such personalities. This is not the case. It is still an unanswered question as to why his name was never mentioned in any of the numerous inscriptions engraved on this temple. Karuvūr Dēvar and his association with the king are based purely on legend and therefore identifying the saintly figure as Karuvūr Dēvar lacks conviction.

The second possibility is that the saintly figure maybe Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita. He was the *guru* of the king and had donated the *stūpis* for the *parivāra* shrines, an honour he shares with the king. Apart from this, there are no references to Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita of having contributed in a literary fashion. Therefore, the identification of the central figure as Īśāna is hard to accept. On the other hand, it is definitely possible that the person seated immediately to the right of the central figure and before Rājārāja could be Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita, as religiously and spiritually he was consigned to a rank higher than the king.

It may be recalled here that traditionally, Rājārāja is credited with the recovery of the lost hymns of the three great Nāyanmārs – Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar – from a closed room in the shrine at Chidambaram under the guidance of Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi. Therefore, Rājārāja is known as *Tirumuṟaikkaṇḍachōlan*. Nambi later classified the collection into *Tirumuṟais*.³⁵ Nambi's association with Rājārāja too is a strongly rooted legend, because there is no recorded historical evidence to prove or disprove it. The date of Nambi too is uncertain.³⁶ But the common understanding is that he was a contemporary of Rājārāja. Consequently, can the saintly figure in the panel be identified as Nambi, and the exposition of the classified hymns being heard for the first time by all? Other internal evidences found within the depiction like the *bhaktas* clashing the cymbals convincingly indicate that hymns were being sung by the saintly figure. The use of cymbals clearly indicates that the discourse is not a mere oration alone, but was combined with singing. The clash of cymbals and *Tēvāram* singing are inseparable. Adding weight to this interpretation is the location of the panel. It is depicted in front of the panel in which Rājārāja worships Naṭarāja at Tillai. Was it deliberately positioned and executed so by the

painter to suggest the tradition of rediscovering the hymns at Tillai? If so, it is logical to conclude that the lower portion of the panel records the rendition of the *Tēvāram* hymns sung after their cataloguing by none other than Nambi himself. Then, the central figure must be Nambi. This panel occupies an unique position as a true portrayal of a historical event.

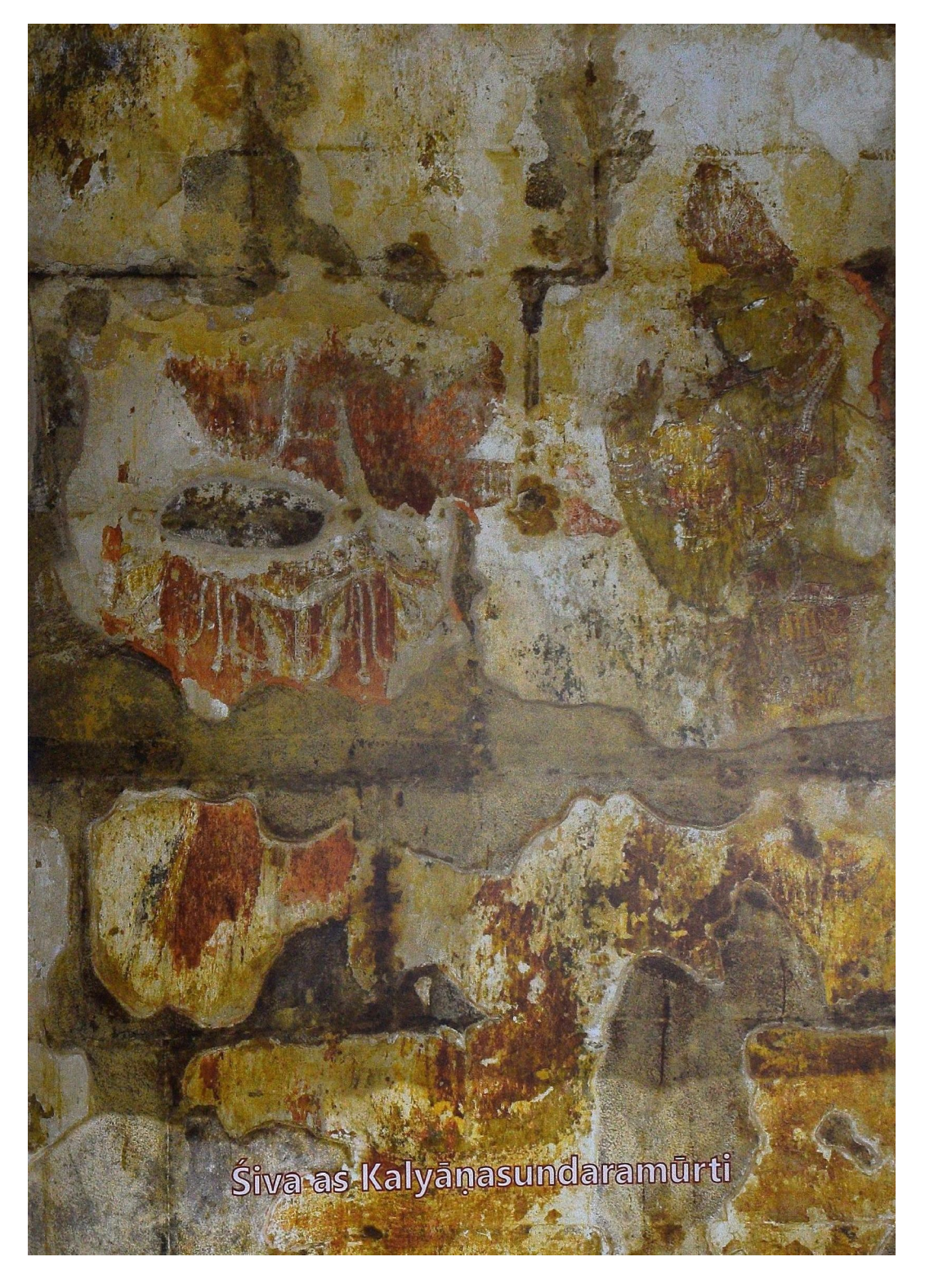
There is likely to be a division in identifying the central saintly figure. However, there can be no two opinions that the depiction is of an important religious and literary event, which happened during the reign of Rājarāja. The matter discoursed upon was of great importance, as it was witnessed by a galaxy of persons, seated in an orderly manner, maintaining a protocol. The person sitting immediately to the right of the central saintly figure could be the '*guru*' of Rājarāja, Īśāna Śiva Paṇḍita (assuming that the identification of the central figure as that of Nambi or Karuvūr Dēvar). He was given an exalted position proportionate to his status, preceding the king in the seating arrangement and a small cushion was provided for him as a mark of his spiritual position, while no other persons, including the king, have one.

The next figure is none other than Rājarāja. The identification is made easy by a simple comparison with the depiction of the same king worshipping the *līṅga* above. Sitting beside him is the young prince Rājēndra. The effort of the painter in executing a youthful face with a slender beard is undoubtedly a masterstroke. In protocol, he comes next to Rājarāja, being the *yuvarāja*, if not made a joint ruler already, as the custom in Chōla dynasty was to crown the prince well during the life of the reigning king.

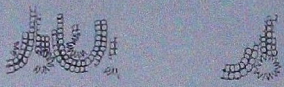
Unfortunately, the next two figures are completely lost. If the order of importance as mentioned in the inscription is to be taken as the benchmark, then it must be Kundavai, the dear sister of the king and Sembiyan Mādēvi, if she was alive at that time. If not, it could be Vallavaraiyar Vantiyātēvar, husband of Kundavai as she was always referred to as his wife. Then, there are the three principal queens of the king, similar in depiction in the opposite panel. The long group of persons of both genders must be the offspring of both Rājarāja and his son. This group was shown in seclusion because of their unique position being the progeny of the king and his son.

The bottom three rows are occupied by fashionably dressed royal women. The variety of their coiffure and elaborate dressing suggests this. The assortments of body complexions clearly indicates that they come from different lands and ethnic entities. As explained earlier, they exhibit a keen sense of fashion as requisite of royal women. Unfortunately, this portion of the painting is highly damaged and the preserved portion of exhibits the colourful variety of beautiful women in the Chōla palace. On the other side are the officials, led by the *senāpati*, all seated in a hierarchical manner, and their status within

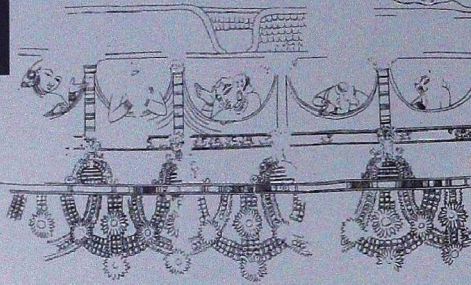
the bureaucracy is clearly indicated by the quality of their attire. The group of *bhaktas* are also from various quarters as indicated by the differences in body complexions. Many of them carry a cymbal and are clashing them too. They are excited in hearing the saintly figure, who was obviously their guru.



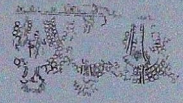
Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti



Congregation of Divine devotees



Women peeping from the balconies



The marriage scene



Western Wall

Northern Wall

5. Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti

Chamber 10 is located in the north-western corner of the *pradakṣiṇā-patha*. The theme of Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti is depicted on its two continuous walls – the end of the western and beginning of the northern outer wall of the sanctum and on the segmental walls above the passage. The walls are of narrow width (2.38 m each). Therefore, the theme is continuously portrayed on all the walls. This panel is highly damaged leaving only traces of figures. However, even in their unrelated context, it is possible to understand the theme. The preserved depictions amply demonstrate the skill of the Chōla painter and his extraordinary control over line to create pleasing forms.

Kalyāṇasundaramūrti is an important aspect of Śiva.³⁷ Sati, consort of Śiva and the daughter of Dakṣa was dead. Śiva, who was in no mood for another marriage, and began doing penance. Utilising the abject situation, Tārakāsura was causing annoyance to the gods and others. The demon could be killed only by a progeny born to Śiva. Therefore, there was no option for the Gods but to plead with Śiva to marry. He was in no mood because of the death of Sati. On the other hand, Sati was reborn as Pārvatī, the daughter of Himavān, the God of the Himālayas. She was bent upon marrying Śiva and none else. Kāma attempted to disturb the belligerent mood of Śiva, only to meet his own end. Finally, Śiva acceded to the request of the Gods for marrying Pārvatī. The marriage was finally solemnised, after Pārvatī's unflinching intent was duly confirmed. The marriage itself was a feast for the eyes. The *Āgamas* describe the scene of marriage in detail on how it was performed and who attended it. Accordingly, the *kanyā-dāta*, wherein the bride would be given to the groom by pouring water, was to be performed by Viṣṇu and his consorts, who would act as the parents. Brahmā would be the officiating priest. All gods – eight Vidyēśvaras (the lords of learning), Aṣṭadīkṣpālas (the guardians of the eight quarters), Yakṣas, and Gandharvas (semi-divine beings), *mātrikās* (the seven mothers) and host of other gods attended the marriage.

This form of Śiva was a favourite theme of the Chōla artists, who had created beautiful representations of Kalyāṇasundaramūrti both in stone and metal.³⁸ The painter was not to be left behind, as he chose this theme to paint the walls of this chamber. He enjoyed the freedom of a large canvas to depict the festive scene of wedding as described in the texts, Śiva and Pārvatī surrounded by all gods, demi-gods and others. Unfortunately, the damage is so severe, leaving behind only a few patches in the lower portion and fairly well preserved patches at the top, which were uncovered by removing the palimpsest layer of the Nāyaka period recently. Earlier, Sivaramamurti was able to identify the brilliantly executed figures of celestials, from the then exposed areas.³⁹



Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Western wall, full view



Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Northern wall, full view



Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Eastern wall, full view



Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Detail of women peeping from the balcony,
Western wall (top) Northern wall (bottom)



*Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti,
detail of divine devotees Northern wall*

On the western wall, at the eye level of the viewer, the scene of marriage is painted. Vishṇu, brilliantly depicted in green, holds a golden pitcher to perform the *kanyā-dātā*. The expression and modelling of this figure is extraordinary. Had the figure of Vishṇu, holding the golden pot (pitcher) not been preserved, it would have been very difficult to identify the theme of this panel. Next to him is Śiva, identifiable because of the red colour of his body, of which only the waist portion with dazzling ornamentation alone is preserved. His stance is according to the prescription in the texts, with the left leg firmly planted and slightly bent right leg. Patches of pigments are only left to represent the figures of Pārvatī, Lakshmī (?) and Brahmā. The flames of the *hōma* are faintly visible. Correspondingly, on the northern wall, there are radiant figures of semi-divine celestials. The skill of the painter is amply reflected in their execution as dynamic figures. They are conversing among themselves about the lustrous marriage ceremony. Among them is a representation of Dakṣa-Prajāpati, whose daughter Sati was married to Śiva. He insulted Śiva, because of which he was beheaded by Vīrabhadra and Kālī. Later, he got a goat head.

Women in the Galleries

However, the *piece de resistance* of this panel is a balconied structure running all around the place where the marriage is being performed. The upper floor continues on either wall without a break, strengthening the conclusion that the same theme was continued there too. The balcony has a prominent, tiled *kapōta*, drawn all round the canvas, delineating the two levels of the structure. The balcony is tastefully decorated with the usual festoonery. Women are peeping through the semi-circular openings created by the sagging of the curtains, tied loosely between the pillars of the upper floor to witness the marriage. There are five openings on the western wall and four on the northern wall, in all accommodating nine (ten?) women of extraordinary beauty and elegance, exhibiting a high sense of fashion. Everyone is enjoying this divine marriage *par excellence* in her own way.



Women peeping from the balcony

The women, peeping out through the first and third opening, simply adore the event. The ones in the second and fourth openings bend and stretch their heads and keep their arms folded above their heads in the *añjali* posture indicating their highest reverence to those assembled below, only their coiffeur is visible. The woman in the last opening is awestruck at the splendour of the event and reflexively closes her mouth with her fingers.

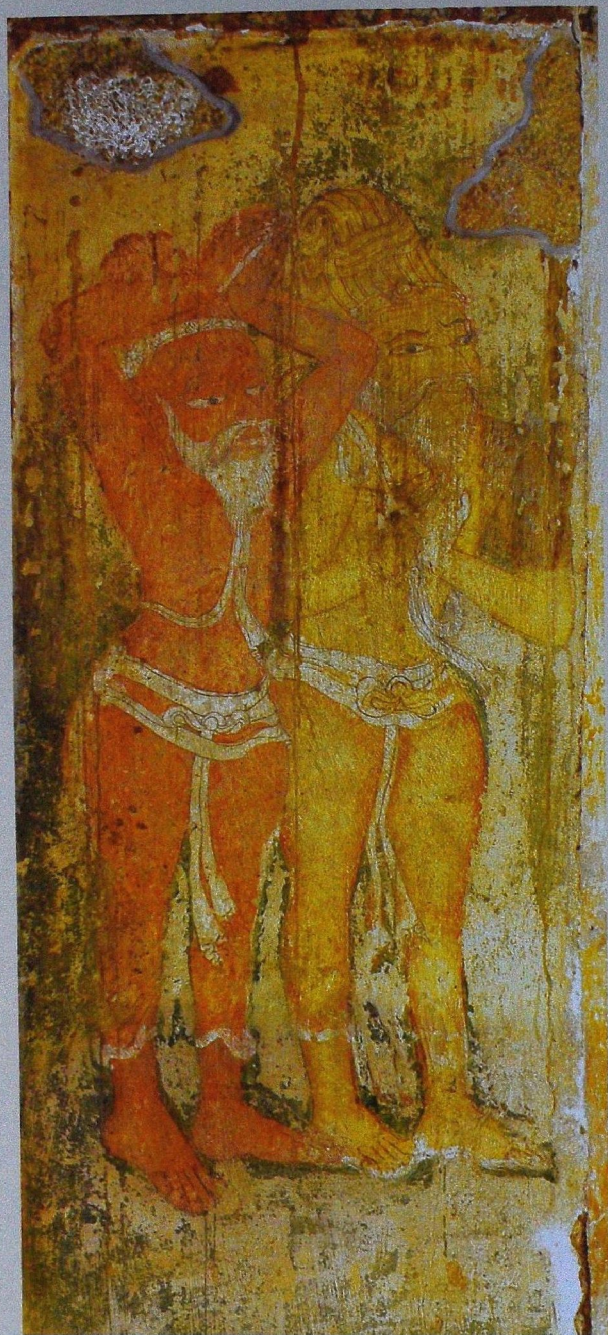
The depiction of these elegant women with captivating expressions further continues in a grander manner on the northern wall. A woman is softly holding the ledge of the first opening. She is at a loss of her senses at the astonishing beauty of the bride and the groom. So much so, her eyes are almost closed, as if she is intoxicated by a shot of ambrosia. The woman at the second opening is spellbound at the enormity of the event and stretches her right hand out of the opening. The painter had indeed stretched his skill of executing lines to represent the fingers, which are spread apart to exclaim the magnificence of the ceremony. The woman at the third is simply overwhelmed at the visual treat, and she expresses it by placing her index finger on her nose, a figurative way of expressing one's ultimate exclamation in the Indian tradition. The woman in the last opening is so fascinated by the beauty of the bride and the groom that her eyes started to droop as she extended her palms to indicate her amazement at the event. The charm of all these women is a visual treat to the person viewing this painting.

Appearing from the clouds above this storied structure and all round the location of the marriage, are divine devotees and seers, all joining their hands in supplication. Their depiction is not only found on the western and northern wall, but also on the segmental wall facing west. On the western wall, there are two depictions of boyish-looking, flying *gandharvas*, each carrying a lotus flower with its stalk. This is quite unique. The modelling of semi-divine persons like devotees and seers is extremely mellowed with soft and free flowing lines. The serene expression on their faces is something highly appreciable.

Rājārāja and Karuvūr Dēvar: The King, His Preceptor or Who Else?

In a small offset in this chamber, at the northwestern corner of the inner wall of the sanctum, is the famous depiction of two male figures, identified and universally accepted as that of Rājārāja and his preceptor Karuvūr Dēvar. A full description of the depiction becomes necessary, considering the admiration the painting has commanded for decades.

These paintings are executed on a broader offset, located at the inner corner of Chamber 10. The whole composition in this offset (44 cm wide and 3.14m high, facing north) consists of four figures drawn in two pairs, one on top and the other at the bottom. One person of the pair on top is red complexioned and the other is yellow complexioned. The former, keeps his folded hands above his head in *añjali*, while the latter keeps it at his chest. Both sport a silky beard and a drooping moustache. Their *jaṭā-bandha* is well treated,

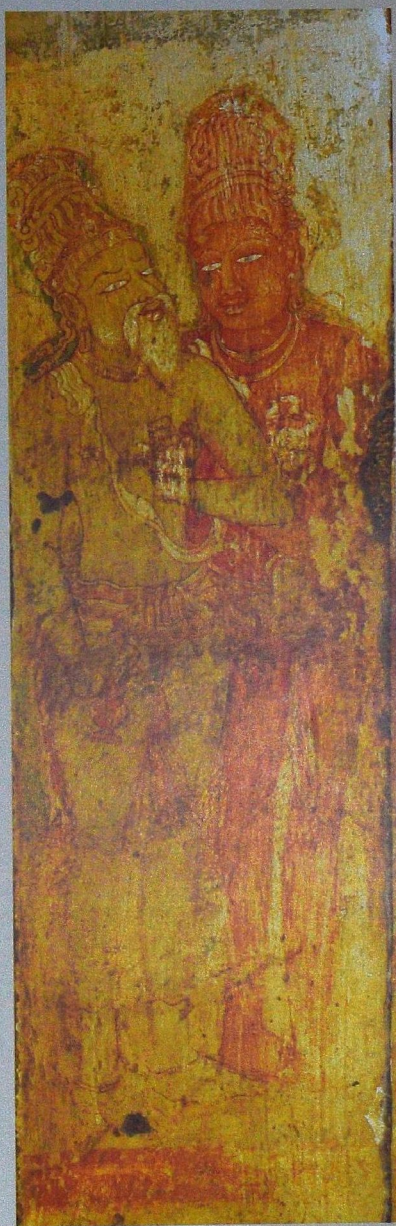


Divine Devotees, Offset, full view (left), detail (right)

with several strands of thick hair. The upper garment is worn differently.⁴⁰ The red-complexioned person is wearing it in the normal fashion, which is over the left shoulder and across the chest, while the other is wearing it in the opposite direction, over the right shoulder and across the chest. Their lower garment too is well treated to be transparent with the thick folds apparently visible at the calf level of the legs.

The two eminent persons painted below are impressively modelled with very fine line treatment and excellent brushwork. The older of two sports a lengthy silky beard and a moustache drooping well over it. The well-set *jaṭā-bandha* has a crown-like decoration at the bottom making it a *jaṭā-makuṭa*. He wears a neck ornament, made of a strong and thick wire of gold having an attached pendant. Interestingly, he too is wearing his upper garment in the reverse manner from the right shoulder to the left side of his body. The lower garments are well finished with golden brocades and he sports an anklet. In his right hand, he holds a *kamaṇḍalu*, while the left hand is kept near his chest, suggesting that he is uttering something. Standing behind him, is a red-complexioned youthful figure, similarly modelled with *jaṭā-bandha*, without the jewelled crown. The upper garment is worn in the normal fashion. The two neck ornaments are made out of thick wire of gold and fused with a pendant.

These two figures are indeed extraordinary in modelling and execution. At the first look, the visitor is engrossed by the 'royal' charm of the younger person. This unusual magnetism brought out by the painter attracted interpreters to identify this figure as king Rājarāja. The other figure was recognized as his preceptor Karuvūr Dēvar. The identification became so deep-rooted, even renowned scholars, in spite of their profound objections, found it very difficult to wean away from this identification.⁴¹ Many features of the figure negate this identification.

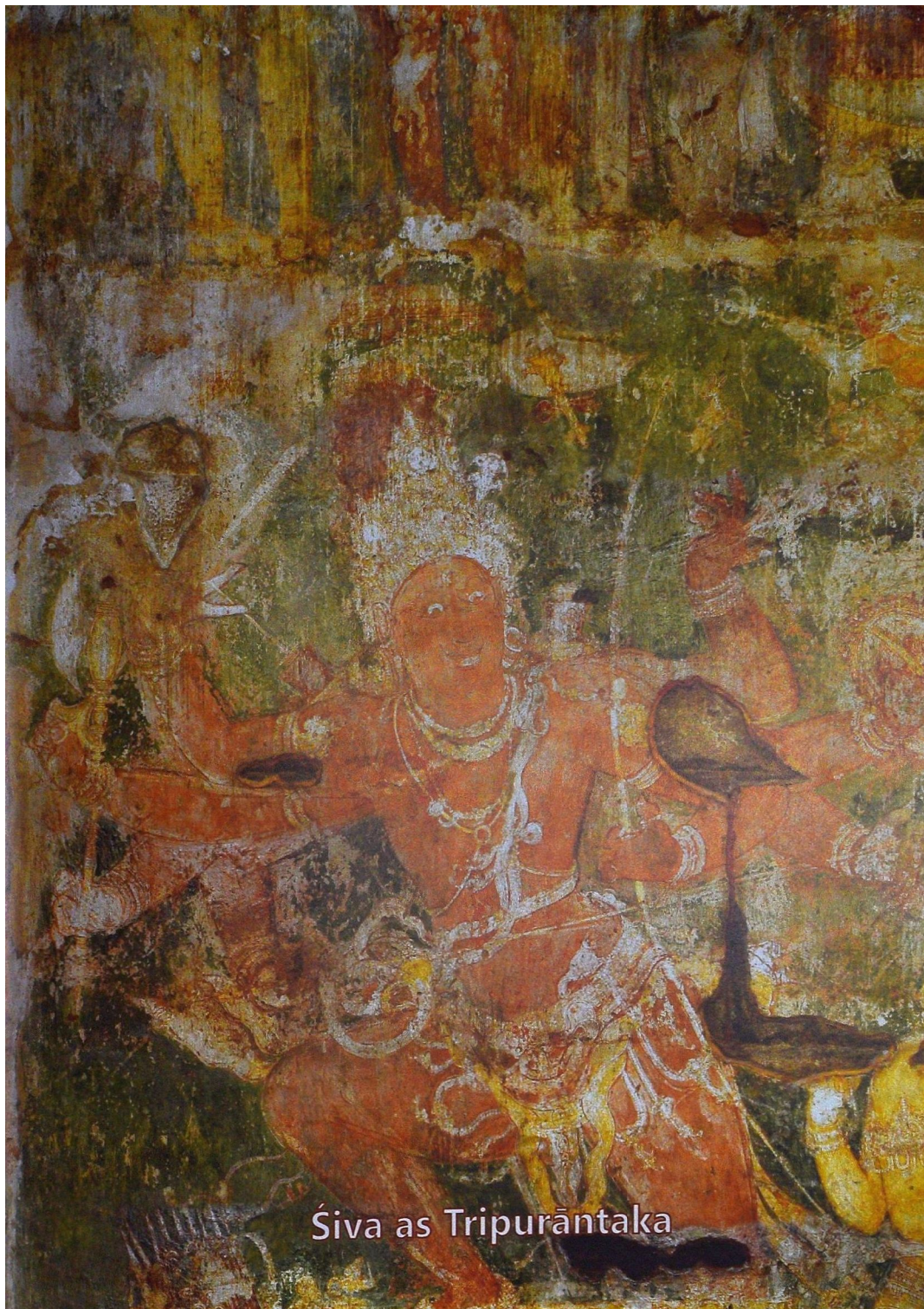


Divine devotees, detail

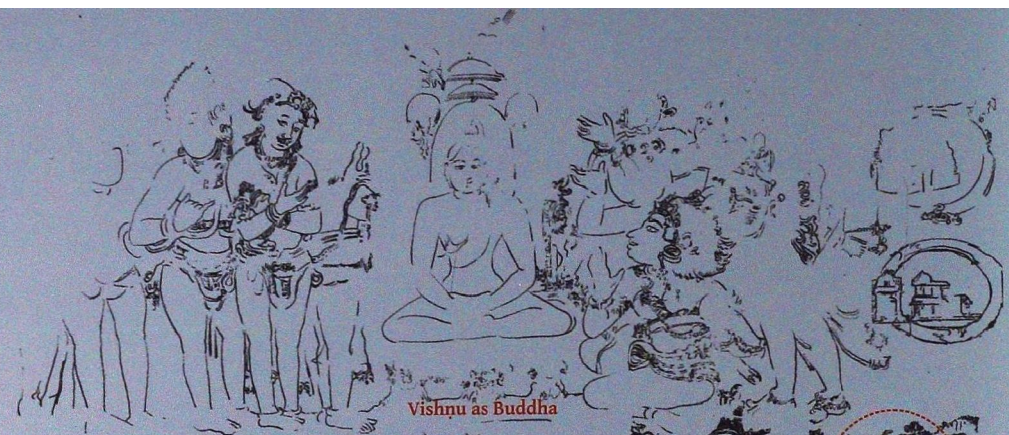
A strong point against this identification is the provision of *jaṭa-bandha* of the younger figure. If it indeed is the representation of the king, why did the painter bestow him the *jaṭa-bandha*, which is usually meant for *rishis* and not for royalty? There are representations of the Rājarāja at three places, Rājendra in one instance and Chēramān at two places in the murals exposed so far. Two of them were rulers and the other a prince. The artist has depicted them with their long hair tied in a large tuft behind the head. The tuft is decorated with flowers in the case of Chēramān.⁴² Similar tufted royal images are seen in the sculptural representations too. Nowhere in the painting are mortal men depicted with *jaṭa-bandha*. Such a coiffeur was provided only to the divine sages. Therefore, identifying one of the figures as a royal figure seems unconvincing. Even accepting that the king, if at all wanted to portray himself with his venerated guru, he would have chosen and dedicated a whole chamber, because depiction with his guru would be a revered dedication for anyone. Definitely, Rājarāja, being a person with a distinguished personality, characterised by a clarity of mind, would not have chosen such an insignificant corner and amidst two other figures.

Therefore, it is wiser to approach the depiction as part of the composition of the festive occasion of marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī as a whole. When seen so, including the offset as part of the chamber, it is easy to identify them as the divine devotees, gathered to witness the marriage along with many.

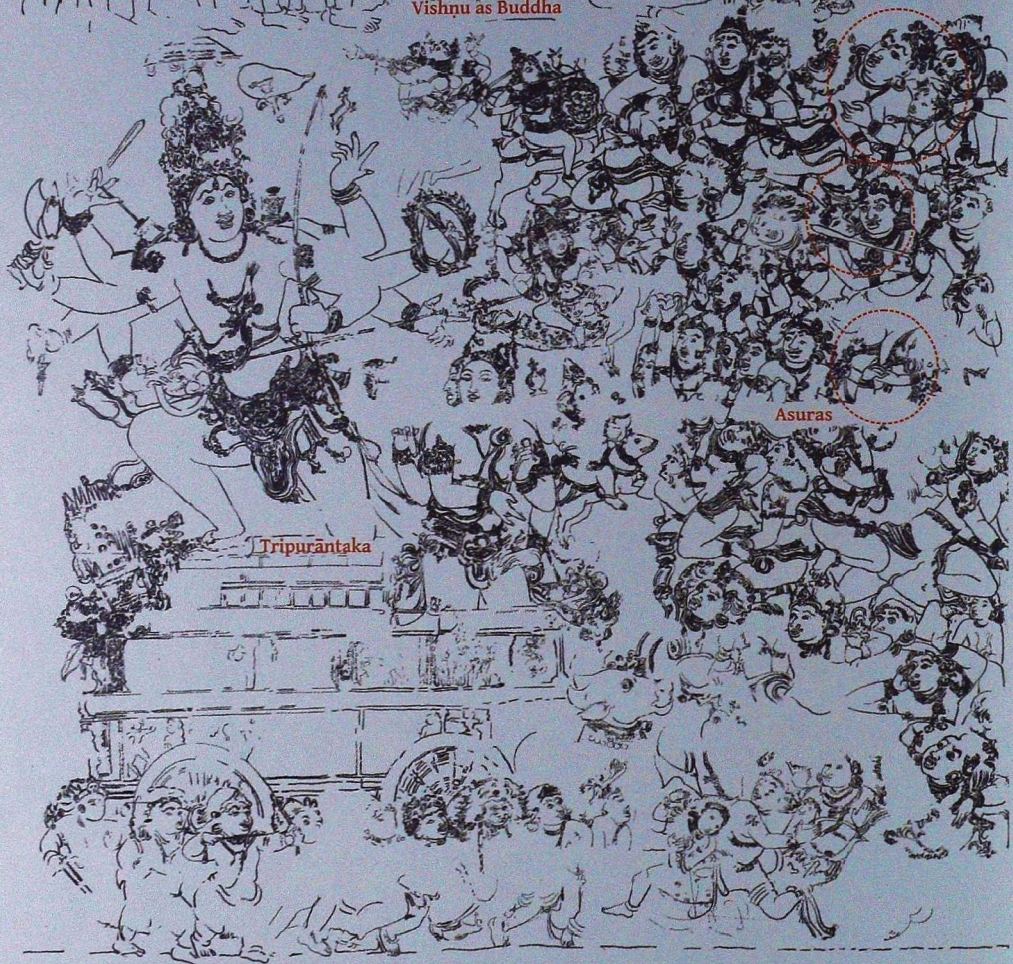
The whole composition is as follows. In a place with a two-tiered cloister, the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī is taking place. Mesmerised women peeping from the balconies were revering this magnificent ceremony. All the gods and semi-divine personalities like venerated seers and devotees who have attained salvation have descended to witness the scene. While the gods are assembled within the place of ceremony, the seers and the divine devotees are witnessing it arboreally. The painter has drawn a few divine devotees by utilising the available space above the cloister and on the segmental wall. All of them are in *añjali* as a mark of respect and facing the marriage scene to witness the ceremony. Similarly, this offset was also utilised to portray such figures. Strengthening this identification are their gestures. Those seers on the top are looking directly at the marriage ceremony and paying their reverence in the *añjali* posture. The painter suggested this by drawing the direction of their vision towards the main portion of the panel, as suggested by the position of the eyeballs and angle of their heads. They are focussed on the marriage ceremony. The seers shown below (so popularly identified as the king and his preceptor) are engrossed in deep conversation about the philosophical meaning of this great marriage, as suggested by the hands held as if they are explaining a point. The texts also describes the marriage of Śiva and Pārvatī as an festive occasion, where every god, demi-gods, divine devotees and others congregated. Therefore, identifying these divine devotees as the king and his preceptor is obviously unconvincing.⁴³



Śiva as Tripurāntaka



Vishnu as Buddha



Tripurāntaka

Asuras

6. Śiva as Tripurāntaka

The magnificent depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka in Chamber 11 is the *magnum opus* of this gallery. Occupying a full recessed portion, this is another panel, where lines, colours and figures are well preserved. Śiva as Tripurāntaka is the most favoured theme of Rājārāja as he placed as many as thirty-two images of Tripurāntaka in the external niches. In addition, the story is carved in bas-relief at two more places.⁴⁴ There is an imperial significance for depicting Tripurāntaka at many places in the temple. On the other hand, this theme has its own metaphysical connotations too. The three great Nāyanmārs Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar- had repeatedly sung about this particular form of Śiva, indicating the wide popularity of the myth in ancient Tamil Nadu.⁴⁵ This theme was popular well before the advent of Chōlas as there are many representations of it in the stone edifices of the Pallavas and the Rāshtrakūṭas.⁴⁶ However, the method of portrayal is very different from that of all other examples done elsewhere in stone. Before discussing the contents of the depiction, a narration of the legend that formed the basis for this depiction is given as follows.⁴⁷ It must be noted that there are several versions of this legend. The variation is textual as different texts have varied accounts, spatial, as different regions of India have their own unique way of depicting the legend and the temporal as the particulars of the legend and its composition in art is varied.

Myth of Tripurāntaka

Vidyumali, Tārakāksha and Kamalāksha, the three sons of Tārakāsura, performed great penance to obtain an unique boon from Brahmā. Accordingly, they should occupy three castles wherefrom they should move as they desired, after a thousand years the three castles should unite into one and at that time, destructible only with a single arrow. Maya, the architect of the *asuras*, built three castles, one of iron on earth, another of silver in the air and the third of gold in heaven. Once these three *asura* brothers became powerful, they began to torment the gods and *rishis*. Having failed to defeat them, the gods approached Brahmā, who gave the boon to the brothers for a solution to end their plight. Brahmā informed them that the castles could be destroyed with a single arrow and Mahādēva alone could wield such a powerful weapon. Therefore, they must pray to him.

Mahādēva (Śiva) accepted the request to destroy the troublemakers, subject to the condition that the gods parted with half of their strength, which made Mahādēva, even more omnipotent. Further, other gods transformed themselves into various forms of his military repertoire, for example, Viṣṇu became his arrow, Agni became its barb and Yamā its feather. Mahādēva made Vēdās (or Mēru) his bow, Sāvitrī (or Ādiśēsha) his bowstring, Brahmā became his charioteer and so on and so forth. There are many



Śiva as Tripurāntaka, full view



Śiva as Tripurāntaka, detail of Tripurāntaka



Śiva as Tripurāntaka, detail of swarming asuras



Śiva as Tripurāntaka, detail of Viṣṇu as Buddha

variations as to who became which attribute of Mahādēva's military repertoire. Having become omnipotent, he set about destroying the *asuras* and their invincible castles.

This simple story was differently told and most variations occur in the manner Mahādēva destroyed the demons and their strongholds. Leaving other variations behind, it is pertinent to mention one of them. The demons were staunch devotees of Śiva and following the daily worship to that effect. Therefore, Śiva did not want to kill them, who were anyhow his devotees, but was ready to destroy their castles, which provided them the strength. Having knowledge of this situation, Viṣṇu swerved them from their routine of worshipping Śiva, by taking the *avatāra* of Buddha and preaching to them heretical thoughts. This act of Viṣṇu veered them away from paying their regular obeisance to Śiva, thus enabling Śiva to kill them. This variation of the legend is unique to South India, particularly Tamil Nadu. It is also said that he never killed them, but simply burnt their castles with cachinnation, a loud laugh, a terrific rage (*aṭṭahāsa*). This is killing two birds with a single stone, as indicated that he never required the strength and help of other gods to destroy them.⁴⁸

The hymns of Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar celebrate this form of Śiva along with that of Śiva castigating Rāvaṇā, when he tried to lift Mount Kailāsa. Some references in these works are of significance. They mention that the *asuras* and their castles were burnt by the mere laughter of Śiva. Among the *asuras*, there were three, who remained steadfast in their devotion to Śiva in spite of Viṣṇu's efforts to veer them away from Śiva-*bhakti*. Śiva pardoned them. He made two of them the *dvāra-pālas* of his temples and the third was assigned the task of playing on the *kuḍamūla*, a pot-drum, when he dances. Sundarar directly refers to this incident in his hymns.⁴⁹ These variations formed the background for the Chōla painter when he composed the canvas for this theme.

Tripurāntaka

This portrayal of Tripurāntaka is remarkable and has no parallel anywhere. Standing majestically in the pit of the chariot in the *alidha* posture, suggesting his invincible stature, his left leg is bent and placed on the top brim of the chariot, while the right leg is planted slanting and firmly within the pit of the chariot. He is eight armed, portrayed with slight variations in the postures and attributes. Two of the four arms on the right hold the *khaṭga* and *parasu*, while the third arm holds one end of the *triśūla* and the last arm is just plucking the arrow from the quiver, tied to the right shoulder. Three of the four left arms hold the *khēṭaka*, the other end of the *triśūla*, and the bow respectively and the last arm is kept in *vismaya* posture amplifying his *aṭṭahāsa*. The weaponry is a further indication of his supreme power. He is bejewelled appropriately with a thin *channavīra* worn across the chest, to indicate his nature as a warrior. The rest of his ornaments are finely portrayed,

and add rhythm to this magnificent depiction. As prescribed in the texts, his body complexion is red and he rides a white chariot that is airborne.

The painter manifests his skill in capturing the facial expression of the lord marvellously in this panel. It is the embodiment of *raudra*. The eyebrows are bent like his bow, and eyeballs are depicted bubbling with anger. The flaring nostrils are filled with breath required to cachinnate. The upper lip is thickened to add more force to the air that is going to be released. The third eye ferociously opens up to show his fury at his own devotees for their wrongdoings. Śiva is about to draw the arrow from his quiver. Strangely, his bow was not even stringed, leave alone stretched. One of his left hands is kept in the *vismaya* posture, more as an act of intimidation rather than admiring something. The painter here followed the version that he burnt the three castles and destroyed the *Asuras* just by his *aṭṭahāsa* and not by the arrow. Śiva's paramount position as Mahādēva among the gods is indicated by a parasol and a whisk (*chāmara*) shown over his head.

Pathetic Deer

While the extraordinary expression detailed on the face of Śiva was well appreciated, how many would have observed the same on the face of the deer he holds? It is an antithesis of expression. In order to warn the *asuras*, Śiva jerks his left hand, which holds the deer, due to the cachinnation emanating from him. Obviously, the deer was thrown up in that aggressive movement. If the deer was shown as being simply thrown up, it would have ended up as an ordinary imagination. However, the painter just extends his imagination to visualize the plight of the poor creature. This jerk is too violent for this soft natured animal. It induces an extraordinary expression of fear in it. Up in the air, its face is enveloped with fear in plenty. The forelegs are folded very tightly and its hind legs are stretched fully to balance itself in the air. When everyone in the field is so intensely fighting the *asuras*, this poor deer is looking at his master in object pity, as if to make him understand that he is the reason for its pathetic situation. Until a moment ago, he was in peace, resting in the hands of his master. Now his position is one of abject fear. One should note that this depiction is just about a few inches in size, insufficient to bring out the emotions of the miserable creature. Nevertheless, the Chōlā painter succeeded in this task, which in itself is a testimony to his great skill.

Other Gods and Gaṇas

The painter did not stop with the magnificent depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka, but continued to show the entire story of this episode, with a gory fight that ensued with the *asuras*. Śiva is being assisted by a hoard of other deities like Gaṇēśa, Subrahmaṇya, Durgā, Kālī, Brahmā, as charioteer and the *gaṇas*. Gaṇēśa is advancing on his mount which is

prancing on the enemies, indeed a great imagination as it is very difficult for a rat to flounce, particularly when he has to support the massive weight of Gaṇeśa. It is difficult to ascertain the attributes of Gaṇeśa as the figure is damaged. Subrahmaṇya, with three of his six faces clearly visible, has four arms, holding a long sword and a *vajra* in his right hands. He is astride his peacock mount and advancing with vigour on the *asura*'s forces with the *vajra*. Durgā, is eight armed and endowed with a sword and bow which is stretched besides other attributes. Her mount, a white lion, is attacking an *asura* by tearing apart the chest with its strong and sharp claws of his forelegs. The poor fellow is being helped by another *asura*, who tries to pull him away from the fury of the lion. Kālī, with *śūla* and a *kapāla* in her hand, flies down to join the action behind Durgā. Brahmā, the charioteer, stands on a lower platform of the chariot. His iconography is interesting. He holds an *akṣhamālā* in one of his right hands and a kind of stick in the other, while there is a *padma-pāsa* in the lower left hand and the corresponding right hand rests on his waist (*kaṭi-hasta*). A kind of water-vessel (*kuṇḍika*?) is shown in the space to his left.

Below the chariot, are many *gaṇas* advancing with agility, vigour and at a great speed towards the *asuras*. This action is depicted with all the charm that the figures of *gaṇas* always commanded and are usually portrayed with. There is a bull in front of the front wheel. This is not Nandi, the *vāhana* of Śiva but Viṣṇu, who took the form of a bull to support the chariot, when its axle was broken before the battle because Gaṇeśa was not invoked in the first instance. The bull actually supports the chariot.

Asuras

This whole depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka and his entourage is depicted over a space, which is slightly more than half the space available on the width. On the other half are the *asuras*, swarming in large numbers at Śiva though their number hardly makes any difference. Therefore, the painter depicted them as a colony of *asuras* crowding a small space, so much so the background is not at all visible. Despite having full knowledge of their ultimate fate, they are fighting with vigour. Their bodies are depicted in all sorts of positions indicating the hammering they were getting from other gods, and the intensity of the same. Some are twisted, others are flying. Few are running away. Some of them are withdrawing a little to regain their strength to attack again with more vigour. They are shown fighting with clubs, long swords and other destructive weapons. A foolish demon is trying to throw a handful of boulders too.

Among this motley crowd, are the three *asuras* Vidyumali, Tārakāksha and Kamalāksha. Their wives, having no role to play in a fierce battle as the present one, are trying to prevent them from fighting Mahādēva. However, their wise counsel never prevailed on the battlefield. The great *asuras* are determined on fighting ahead. Their



One of three asuras being stopped by his wife and the guru (?)

terrific facial expression with swollen eyes and screeching mouth suggests their determination to fight. Their eyes show the fury as their presumed might was challenged. Contrarily, their wives are literally weeping as their eyes suggest. Standing in a corner, with a sad face, is perhaps the *guru* of *asuras* Sukra or Maya, the architect of the three castles. Among all the dispirited and disoriented *asuras*, is a sane one, who has remembered to carry his daily votive object the *liṅga*. This very devout one carries the *liṅga* on his head in all reverence. Perhaps he may be the one rewarded with the honour of playing the pot-drum when Śiva dances.

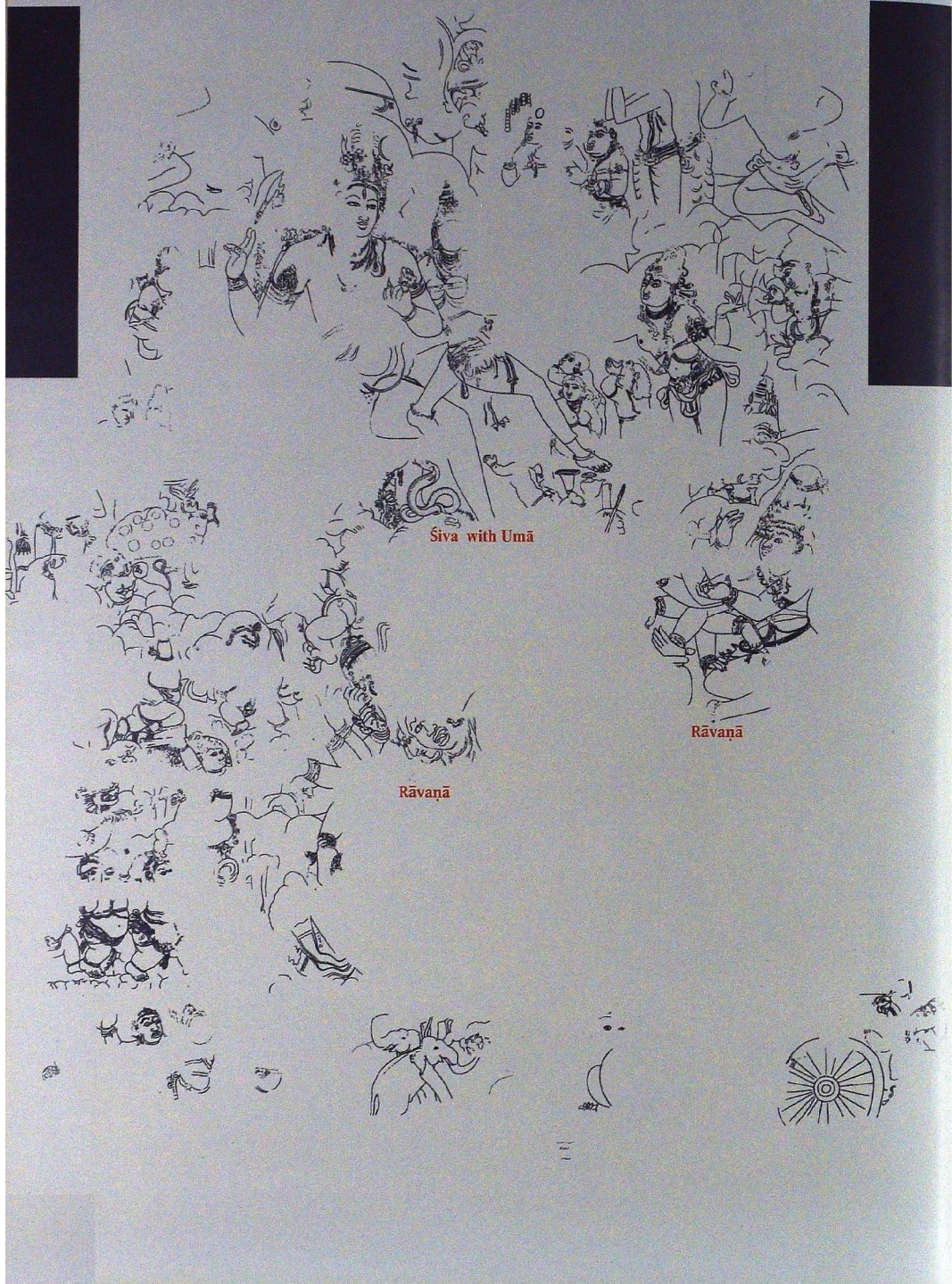
Vishṇu as Buddha

The top register of the panel depicts Vishṇu as Buddha weaning away the *asuras* from their devotion to Śiva. At the centre Buddha is seated on a *simhāsana* with a *trichchatra* over his head. There is a halo around his head. He is wearing an *uttariya* (setting this depiction apart from that of Jaina *tīrathaṅkaras*). There are *asuras* on his left and right. Their three elliptical citadels are shown at the right on the extreme.

When the entire depiction is seen in the proper perspective, it seems that the painter had conceived it in accordance with the *āgamic* prescriptions and traditions. A noted authority on Hindu iconography enumerates about the eight forms of Tripurāntaka.⁵⁰ Among these, this corresponds closely to the eighth form described therein. There are however minor variations in the placement of legs, for example, the left leg is raised instead of the right and placed on the chariot. Dēvi is absent, perhaps painted in the broader offset, which is not exposed. The attributes of Brahmā are followed strictly. In addition to the *āgamic* prescriptions, the painter also followed traditions that were in vogue in the contemporary Tamil country.



Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti



7. Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti

There is a much worn out depiction of Śiva as Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti on the wall opposite to the magnificent depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka painted in Chamber 11. It is quite difficult to pick out the details either with the naked eye at the site, or while magnifying the digital documentation. All that is visible are the figures of Śiva, Umā, Rāvaṇā, Kālī, a few *gaṇas* and animals like buffalo, elephant and a snake.

Rāvaṇa, the great demon and the king of Laṅka was returning after the subjugation of Kubēra, his half-brother. As he was passing through a place, where a beautiful garden was laid, over which his *vimāna* (*Pushpaka*), was refusing to fly. Rāvaṇa alighted from the *vimāna* and tried to enter the place. He was prevented from entering by Nandikēśvara, on the reason that Śiva and Umā were resting there and no one including gods had permission to fly through at that time. On hearing this Rāvaṇa became furious, and insulted the greatness of Mahādēva, and tried to pluck away the Kailāsa with his twenty arms. The rumblings terrorised Umā, who immediately clung to Śiva. Śiva, realising the cause for Uma's reaction, pressed his big toe. The pressure exerted by Śiva's toe was



Rāvaṇā





Śiva as Rāvaṇānuagrahamūrti, full view

unbearable for Rāvaṇa, in spite of his strength. He realised his mistake and prayed to God for pardon. The very name Rāvaṇa means the one 'who screeched so loudly'. Śiva pardoned him and presented him with a sword. Rāvaṇa became a great devotee of Śiva. It is said that being a skilled *vīṇa* player, a versatile musician and authority on Vēdas, Rāvaṇa chanted the Sāma Vēda to please Śiva.

This panel, even in an eroded condition, has sufficient proof to conclude that it depicts the theme narrated above. The majestic figure of Śiva, seated on a boulder in Kailāsa is visible, so are the figures of Pārvatī, seated on the lap of Śiva, could be made out vaguely with great difficulty. Rāvaṇa is depicted twice, once as screaming at the pressure exerted by Śiva on him and again as singing, perhaps the hymns from the Sāma Vēda, counting the metre with a left hand and a right hand playing on the pot-drum. Interestingly, Śiva's left lower hand is held in a posture as if he too maintains the count of syllables of the recitation. Kālī is dancing by the side of Śiva.

The figures are damaged so much, that it is very difficult to pick them and correlate them with each other. A few *gaṇas* here and there, including one flying upside down, a buffalo, an elephant, a lion and little amount of vegetation is all that could be discerned in this panel. The boulders of Kailāsa are barely visible. However, the cobra, probably disturbed by the act of Rāvaṇa, had risen from its slumber. Its twisted coil and spread out hood is an extraordinary depiction of line and colour. It could be easily concluded that the portrayal of the theme was more graphic than the depiction of the same theme on stone found on so many edifices spread all over India. Unfortunately, the panel has been preserved in patches only.



Cobra

Notes

1. T.N. Ramachandran, 'The Great Temple of Tanjore and the Place of Chola Art in the History of Indian Wall Paintings', *Tanjaik Kalaik Kankatchi Malar* (Thanjavur, 1955), R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), pp. 101-120, R. Champakalakshmi, "New Light on the Cola Frescoes of Tanjore", *Journal of Indian History*, Golden Jubilee Volume (1973), pp. 349-359, Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Tanjavur (AD 600-1850)* (Tanjavur, 1994) in Tamil.
2. Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *op. cit.*
3. K.R. Srinivasan, 'The Peruvudaiyar (Brihadisvara) Temple: Tanjavur: A Study', in Margabandhu, C. (ed.) *Indian Archaeological Heritage*, K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 525-538. This is simply a reference, not a detailed discussion.
4. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (2nd Edn.) (Delhi, 1968), Vol. 1, pt. II, p. 382
5. R. Nagaswamy, 'Iconography and Significance of the Brhadiśvara Temple, Tañjāvūr', in Meister, M. W (ed.) *Discourses on Siva*, (Bombay, 1984), pp. 170-181.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *South-Indian Inscriptions*, Vol II, No. 90. He is mentioned as the *uḍaiyār Rājārājathevarin kurukkal*, guru of Rājārāja. It records his name as the donee of the gilt *stūpikkuḍam* (*stūpi*) for the *dīkpāla* shrines. This inscription records the donations by him and the other *śivāchārya* Pāvanappiḍāran given to the temple during the rule of Rājārāja and his son Rājendra.
8. *Ibid.*, No. 20.
9. It may be recalled here that Rājārāja donated a copper image (*seppu tirumēni*, sacred image of copper) of Dakṣiṇāmūrti, which was described in an epigraph engraved on a pillar in the northern *prākāra*. The description is accurate with dimensions, described the god as seated on a hillock under a banyan tree (*āla vrikshā*). He is four armed trampling the *musalagan* (*apasmāra puruṣa*). The most interesting item of the description is the *pokkanam* and the stick with peacock feathers. The description in the epigraph ends abruptly with a snake being placed on the tree, denying us a chance to know whether the tree with those wonderful animals being threatened by the snake, as captured in the painting.
10. The events that happened in Sundarar's life are enumerated in the Twelfth century AD work of *Periya Purāṇam* by Sēkkiḷār. This work in fact provides the biographical details of all the sixty-three servitors (Nāyanmārs), but told intertwined with the biography of Sundarar. See G. Vanmikanathan's (Madras, 1985) translation.
11. The verse begins with "*pittā pirai sūḍip perumāne*". Śiva, being amused by the way Nambi fought with him during the dispute, further stated that Nambi will be known as Vanthonḍar, a 'militant servitor'. Later, he was named *Tambirāṇ thōḷar*, the friend of the Lord. This special relationship is reflected in a majority of his hymns making the rendering not only soaked in *bhakti* but also a pleasing one.
12. This he refers to in his last decade of hymns *Tirunoṭṭānmalaiappatikam*, said to have been composed while journeying through the ether towards Kailāsa. His description of his journey is quite graphic. Few hymns border on a self-assessment of his eventful life too. See *Tirumurai*, 7: 1017-1025.
13. Sundarar's life is full of many miraculous events. There are a number of internal references in his own verses. He was in dire need of money very often and would pray to the Lord, who would test him before obliging. Such incidences are not narrated here considering the fact that they were not depicted in the mural. See K. Vellaivanan, *Paṇṇiru Tirumurai Varalāru*, Vol. I (Chidambaram, 1972), pp. 21-25 for a comprehensive description of the life of Sundarar based on *Periya Purāṇam*.
14. One such example is the Vaikuṇṭha Perumāḷ Temple at Uttaramerur near Kanchipuram, having a massive and ornate base.
15. There are definitely letters painted on the palm-leaf. Based on the term given in Sēkkiḷār's *Periya Purāṇam* (Verse 205), Kudavayil Balasubramanian reads it as *ippaṭi ariyan itarkivai yen yeluttu* (Let it be known like this. Set my signature (in token thereof)). See Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Irājarājēccaram* (in Tamil) Manjakudy (Tanjavur, 2010), p. 237. S. Rajavelu, in a personal discussion holds that the term *muveṇḍavēḷāṇ* is discernable in the script. The term refers to a revenue official of the Chōla state. Persons with a similar title very often found to be an attesting officer in the execution of any

endowment. Therefore, he holds that a competent officer duly attested the document. However, there is no accepted reading of the same as the letters are quite illegible.

16. C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Paintings* (New Delhi, 1968), pp. 79-89, R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), pp. 101-120, R. Champakalakshmi, *op. cit.*, B. Venkataraman, *Rajarajesvaram: The Pinnacle of Chola Art* (Madras, 1985), Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Irājarājēccaram* (in Tamil) Manjakudy (Tanjavur, 2010), p. 238.
17. It is not Chēramān as mentioned by other scholars. The clinching evidence is the cymbals held by the figure. Cymbals and signing of the *Tiruppati* hymns are synonymous and inseparable. The Chōla painter used this motif exclusively when a person was singing a *Tiruppati*. Invariably, Sundarar is shown with the cymbal at three other instances, while seated in front of the Tiruvārūtturai temple, when he was atop the elephant and seated in front of Śiva at Kailāsa. Further, in all the portrayals, right from the marriage scenes to the end, he is not shown sporting a moustache. On the other hand, Chēramān is never on the cymbals and is shown always with a moustache on both occasions - while galloping on the horse and at Kailāsa, perhaps indicating his *kshatriya* status. Therefore, the figure seated in front of the temple is Sundarar and not Chēramān.
18. *Tirumurai*, 7: 32-41.
19. *Ibid.*, 1017-1026.
20. *Ibid.*, 1017.
21. *Ibid.*, 1026.
22. R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), pp. 101-120.
23. R. Champakalakshmi, *op. cit.*, pp. 349-359. Kudavayil Balasubramanian agrees with the identification proposed here. See Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *op. cit.*
24. The present day Naṭarāja temple at Chidambaram was the product of extensive renovations that were undertaken in the twelfth century AD and later. Today, the *Chitsabhā* has a granite *adhishtana*, over which there are timber pillars supporting a wooden roof system. The roof is gilded with gold externally. There is a pillared hall in front, the *Kanakasabhā*, is built of granite with a timber roof-system but covered with copper sheets. There is a level difference between these units, and the '*Chitsabhā*' which is at a higher level. There are shrines for Gōvindarāja and Brahma-Chaṇḍikēśa within the courtyard. A double storied *prākāra* wall surrounds the courtyard. For the present discussion the shrine for Gōvindarāja and all those beyond the *prākāra* are not being considered. There are different opinions about the antiquity of the sanctum, the *Chitsabhā* and the hall in front *Kanakasabhā*. Generally, it is accepted by many that the original structure was retained in the twelfth century and later renovations.
25. T. Satyamurthi, *The Nataraja Temple: History, Art, and Architecture* (New Delhi, 1978), Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *op. cit.*, p. 238, argues that Chidambaram had connections with Chēra country for a long time. Legend says that the Brahmins of Tillai had to move out of the palace only to come back again borrowing the practice of tying their hair in a typical tuft in the same fashion the Kerala Brahmins do. Further painters from Kerala were employed in the reconstructions and repairs of this temple even a few centuries ago. Therefore, Chēra art and architectural motifs are conspicuous in this panel. But the fact is that similar use of tiles for the *kapōta* seems to be a practice of the Chōla country. As a rule, the *kapōta* of the peripheral structures in the murals have been depicted with tiles only. For instance, the *kapōta* of the adjoining structures outside the *prākāra* of this temple are drawn with *kapōta* with tiles. Similarly, the hall in which Rājarāja is worshipping the *liṅga* there are *kapōtas* at three levels. Further, the balcony depicted in the Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti panel, has a *kapōta* with tiles in the façade. Therefore, this is a commonly depicted motif in the murals.
26. S. Paramasivan, 'The Mural Paintings in the Brihadisvara Temple at Tanjore: An Investigation into the Method', *Technical Studies*, V (1937), pp. 221-240. A line sketch of his shows the area covered by the exposed Chōla layer, which exactly corresponds to figures of women admired by C. Sivaramamurti and others.
27. S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, *Middle Chola Temples* (Faridabad, 1975), pp. 33-34.
28. C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Paintings* (New Delhi, 1968), p. 87.

29. R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), p. 117.
30. R. Champakalakshmi, *op. cit.*
31. The *yōni-piṭha* in the present day sanctum is not monolithic and built of several massive blocks of stone. Therefore, the opinion that the *liṅga* was installed once the plinth level was achieved, as proposed by many including K.R. Srinivasan, may not be true. This indicates that the *liṅga* was under worship for long before its installation.
32. Generally, the posture of the hand is kept upright in sculptural representation. Whenever, the painter wanted to portray a figure as if exclaiming a certain thing, he has used this motif. Every figure in this portion is provided with a similar hand posture, indicating the extraordinary significance of the contents being dwelt upon by the saintly figure.
33. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cōlas* (Revised 2nd Ed., Madras, 2000), pp. 462–470, for discussion on the Chōla bureaucracy.
34. *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, No. 1. It is also customary, as per the *āgamic* prescriptions, an image should be fully decorated and worshiped in an open *maṇḍapa* in a grand manner before its establishment in the sanctum.
35. A work called *Tirumuraikaṇḍapurāṇam* by Korṟavankuḍi Umāpati Sivam, who lived sometime in the thirteenth century, is the source of this legend. He definitely lived after Sēkkiḷār, who compiled the *Periya Purāṇam*, delineating the life stories of the famous sixty-three Śaiva servitors, Nāyanmārs and the eight groups of Śaiva *bhaktas*, during the reign of Kulottunga II (AD 1130–1150). *Tirumuraikaṇḍapurāṇam* spreads out the story of how a Chōla king named Rājārāja mannan (king) Abhayakulāśēkharan (and not simply Rājārāja) came to know about the existence of sacred hymns of great servitors like Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar. Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi guided him to the precincts of the Kōyil, the Tillai temple, where the leaves containing the hymns were preserved. They were able to recover a portion of the collection, the rest were lost forever. At the request of the king, Nambi proceeded to categorize the collection into *Tirumuraīs*. The work goes on to imply that the classification of all hymns into thirteen *Tirumuraīs* was the achievement of Nambi, which seems to be a well-recorded Śaiva tradition. It is generally accepted by modern scholars that Nambi is responsible for the collection and classification of the hymns of the three great saints Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar into the first seven *Tirumuraīs*. Rest of the hymns by other servitors were added as other *Tirumuraīs* later on. See K. Vellaivaranan, *Panniru Tirumurai Varalaru*, Vol. I (Chidambaram, 1972).
36. K. Vellaivaranan dates Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi to the period of Āḍitya I (AD 871–907), see *op. cit.*, pp. 21–25. S. Somasundara Desikar ascribes him to Āḍitya II (AD 960–965), 'Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi', *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Volume 4, Issue 3 (Calcutta, 1928), pp. 446–452. On the other hand, a majority of the scholars agree to the dating of Nambi Āṇḍār Nambi to the period of Rājārāja. See K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Cōlas* (Revised 2nd Ed., Madras 2000) and S.R. Balasubrahmanyam, *Middle Chola Temples* (Faridabad, 1975), pp. 79–80, footnote.
37. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (2nd Edn.) (Delhi, 1968), Vol. 2, pt. I, pp. 337–344. The following mythological account is based on this work.
38. A bas-relief representation of this myth is found on the eastern portion of *adhishthāna* of Rājārājāṇ-tiruvāyil and on the sides of the flight of steps leading to the transept of the sanctum. This depiction is slightly different from the depiction in the painting. There are several examples in metals, where Śiva is shown holding the hand of Pārvati.
39. C. Sivaramamurti, *South Indian Paintings* (New Delhi, 1968), p. 87. Govindaswamy himself exposed these figures. See S.K. Govindaswami, 'The Frescos of the Brihadisvara Temple at Tanjore', *Journal of Annamalai University*, Vol. II (1933).
40. This is normally misunderstood as the *yaṇjopavīta* of cloth. However, it was identified as *yōga-paṭṭa*, a type of *uttariya*. See Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Irājārājēccaram* (in Tamil) Manjakudy (Tanjavur, 2010), p. 246.
41. For example, R. Nagaswamy, *Oviyap Pavai* (Madras, 1979), pp. 101–120.
42. The rulers are depicted in these murals with minimal jewellery, perhaps due to their extraordinary religious inclination. The context could also have influenced such a simple depiction. To be precise,

Chēramān is depicted in two contexts, viz., his ascent at Kailāsa, wherein his royal status is irrelevant because of his salvation from the mortal world. Rājarāja's figure occurs in three contexts as worshipping his Lord at two places and while listening to a great religious exposition. Here too, the royal status is redundant as he is simply a human being rather than the political head of a kingdom. It is interesting to compare these figures with that of the Pāṇḍyan king Śrīmāra at Sittannāvāsai where he was portrayed with all royal paraphernalia.

43. Kudavayil Balasubramanian identifies the four figures as Sanantana, Sanāthana, Sanatkumara and Sanaka, the celebrated four *rishis*. Based on a text called *Mūrtidhyāna*, he identifies the younger figure as that of Sanaka, who should be shown as a young person, while others should be old, which exactly matches with the depiction here. This may be nearer to truth, provided more such depiction of these *rishis* is met with. Kudavayil Balasubramanian, *Irājarājēccaram* (in Tamil) Manjakudy (Tanjavur, 2010) p. 248.
44. K. R. Srinivasan, 'An Interesting Sculpture in Tanjavur', in M.S. Nagaraja Rao (Ed.), *Kusumājāli: New Interpretation of Indian Art & Culture: C. Sivaramamurti Commemoration Volume* (New Delhi, 1987), pp. 315-321, for a comprehensive review of the depictions of Tripurāntaka in this temple.
45. The legend of Tripurāntaka is referred to in the Saṅgam literature. The three important Nāyanmārs, Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar mention the episode of Tripurāntaka in their hymns approximately for three hundred and twenty nine, two hundred and eighty five and seventy two times respectively. See T. Rajamanikkam, *Saiva Vaiṇava teivat tiruvuruvaṇkaḷ*, (Madras, 1989). Among all forms of Śiva, this form enjoys the maximum reverence of all. K.R. Srinivasan, *op. cit.*, note 8, D. Dayalan, 'Hymns of Nayanmars and the Tripurantaka Episode in Big Temple, Tanjavur', in Margabandhu, C. (ed.) *Indian Archaeological Heritage*, K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 445-447 for references to this episode in the hymns of the above.
46. Gerd J.R. Mevissen, 'Early Stone Sculptures of Tripurāntaka in South India', Arundhati Banerji (Ed), *Hari Smṛiti: Studies on Art, Archaeology, and Indology: Papers Presented in Memory of Dr. Haribishnu Sarkar* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 122-142.
47. The narration of the legend follows T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* (2nd Ed.) (Delhi, 1968), Vol. 1, pt. II, pp. 164-171.
48. The legend of Śiva and the burning of the three castles was quite popular from early centuries of the current era onwards. There are a number of sculptural representations, particularly at the Kailāsanātha temple at Kanchipuram and the great Kailāsa at Ellōra. This story was integrated into the *sthalapurāṇas* in a few temples in Tamil country, like at Tiruvadigai (one of the eight places where Śiva is said to have performed *saṁhāras*, here it is the three *asuras*), Terelundur and Achchiruppakkam. At the latter place, it is said that the chariot of Śiva was struck with a broken axle, because they had failed to invoke Gaṇēśa before their adventure and hence he caused this small hiccup. This incident has been incorporated in the *sthalapurāṇa* of Achchiruppakkam. The Aruṇagirī Nāthar's *Tiruppukal* mentions this episode in the invocation to Gaṇēśa.
49. Viruddha, Paramayōga and Guṇabhara are sometimes named as Sudanman, Subuddhi and Susilan or even the three main demons themselves. This incident was referred to by Sundarar (7: 55: 7, 567) without naming them. *Kallāḍam*, a Tamil work of the eleventh century too refers to this episode in detail. *Kallāḍam*, 23: 11, 39-41, 26: 11, 13-37.
50. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *op. cit.*

The Murals

Their Technique and Treatment

There are two fundamental techniques employed widely by mural painters from ancient times, viz. tempera and fresco. In tempera, the pigments are tempered with a binding medium, such as glue size (gelatinous solution), gum, parchment size or a size made from eggs beaten with water. The tempered pigments are generally applied on a dry ground. On drying, the pigments will become a distinct layer. The pigments are held together on and with the surface of the plaster, by the binding properties of the materials used in tempering. If the binding properties of the materials used are good, the pigments will hold fast for a longer duration on the ground. Otherwise, there are chances that the pigment layer will peel off from the ground. The painter enjoys considerable freedom in this technique, as his palette can have variety and different tones of colours, and he has time at his disposal to finish the painting. The durability of the work is entirely dependent on the binding strength of the materials used.

Painters of ancient India widely used the tempera technique. Ancient Indian texts on painting too describe various procedures to be followed in the preparation of the ground and the pigments, which are essentially tempera in nature. Among the mural remains, Ajanta is the best-known example of the use of the tempera technique, where the ground (rough plaster) was prepared out of ferruginous earth containing a large proportion of clay, silica, vegetable fibres or paddy husks, but does not contain any organic binding material such as glue, gum, drying oil, albumin or casein. This layer was evened out with a very fine plaster of lime; over this, the pigments were applied with an animal glue as the binding medium. There were many temporal and spatial variations in the preparation of the ground and the pigments.¹

The fresco technique too is an ancient technique.² The outstanding feature of *Fresco buono* or true fresco is that the pigments are mixed in water (unlike an organic medium used in tempera) and applied directly on fresh lime plaster (the ground) when it is still wet. As long as the plaster is wet, the colours applied become saturated with lime. During drying, the lime on the surface and for a slight depth below the surface of the plaster, rapidly absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to become a carbonate of lime, forming a crystalline surface covering. The colour pigments, when applied on wet plaster,

will be locked up in the spaces between the crystals and are protected from all atmospheric influences when the surface dries out. Once the pigments are locked in the crystals, they integrate with the lime plaster. These thin coverings of carbonates and silicates of lime enable fresco paintings to last long. It makes the pigment layer impervious to humidity or dampness on the surface, so that they can be occasionally washed with water without much injury. However, the fresco technique is quite intricate requiring deft hands and is fraught with constraints.

Difficulties in Executing True Fresco

The technique may look uncomplicated. However, there are many difficulties in its execution, foremost among them being the preparation of the lime plaster with high plasticity to make it withstand the vagaries of time. Second, it is essential to keep the plaster wet for the entire duration of the painting. Therefore, the general *modus operandi* of European fresco painters was to apply the plaster only over a specific area, which would be painted upon on a particular day. The contiguous area would be taken up the next day and the process was thus continued. This resulted in visible joints. Such joints are taken to be a symptomatic factor for identifying a mural as a 'true fresco'.

The range of pigments that can be used in fresco paintings is limited. The pigments used have to be compatible with the alkaline lime medium. The best-suited pigments are mineral colours like ochre. Further, the tone of the applied colour is bound to diminish with the drying of the lime. Therefore, the painter should have a good sense of judgement about his pigments. Since pigments have to be applied while the plaster is still wet, the painter has to be very deft. Therefore, execution of murals in a true fresco is indeed a challenging endeavour. However, there are many variants in the fresco technique, including the *Ala gila*, a technique widely used in present day Rajasthan.

Are the Chōla Murals Frescos?

S. Paramasivan, a pioneering archaeological chemist, conducted the first analytical study of the samples from the Chōla layer. He obtained the samples from the site while engaged in the chemical preservation of the murals.³ His microscopic studies of the plaster samples indicated that the ground consisted of three layers of plaster. The first layer is a rough plaster (average thickness 1.8 mm) which was laid directly on the stone wall. The next layer, a rough one too, was immediately applied, when the bottom layer was still wet. These two layers were almost integrated into one, and the demarcation was very difficult to identify under a microscope. Over this layer, a very finely finished plaster (0.7 mm thick) was applied when the bottom layers were a bit dry, as this layer was not so strongly fixed to the ground layer, and the demarcation was fairly visible under the microscope. The analysis of the composition of the plaster indicated that the fine plaster was richer in lime,

while the rough plaster had a higher percentage of silica, indicating the use of sand as grit. According to him, the results of his tests on pigments are quite clinching and his observations were:

- a. The pigments adhered firmly to the plaster, they firmly withstood, a brushing over with a wet sponge or rubbing with fingers. Small fragments of the painted plaster also withstood sustained exposure in boiling water and there was no damage or injury to the surface or to the paint. (Had it been applied in tempera, the paint layer will flake off or stain the hand, if applied in *secco* it will disintegrate in boiling water).
- b. Prolonged treatment with pure ether and other solvents like chloroform and carbon-di-sulphide, failed to extract any vehicle or medium.
- c. When a fragment of painted layer was treated with dilute hydrochloric acid, it invariably disintegrates with effervescence and the evolution of carbon dioxide and finally the pigments were left in a powdery state. This test indicated that it was only the carbonate of lime which binds together the particles of the pigment. Had the tempera process been adopted here, the painted surface would have remained as a flake without disintegrating. This characteristic reaction is so consistent with several fragments examined that it leaves no room for doubt.

These three tests according to Paramasivan conclusively prove that the technique employed in the execution was indeed 'true fresco'. However, there was an immediate rejoinder to his conclusions by another pioneering archaeological chemist, Mohammad Sana Ullah.⁴ Sana Ullah obtained samples of the pigments from Paramasivan and subjected them to similar tests. The hot water tests performed by Sana Ullah indicated the presence of an organic binding medium in the paint layer. He argues that Paramasivan's tests for an organic vehicle or medium, failed because such a binding medium would have decomposed over time and hence difficult to detect. Second, the solvents used cannot detect the use of glue, which was recommended in the texts. Sana Ullah's microscopic studies clearly indicated that the pigments were driven into the spaces between the crystals of carbonate and silicate, which is a characteristic feature of fresco paintings, which was not properly explained by Sana Ullah. Nevertheless, he concluded that the technique was tempera in nature. Sana Ullah argues that the Chōla painter used a superior tempera technique, which included application of pigments using an organic medium when the surface was moist and then polished it. He further argues that the moisture retaining capacity of the very thin layer of plaster, applied by the Chōla painter, would be very less, and would have definitely impeded execution. The rejoinder by Paramasivan is

also equally erudite to prove that his conclusions are correct.⁵ A recent study by Subbaraman of the pigments using XRD analysis indicates a strong presence of calcite even on the outermost surface of the paint layer, which is an obvious indication that carbonation had taken place following the painting process.⁶ This could happen only if the plaster had remained wet for a considerable time after the painting process was completed.

Lack of Joints

Another significant feature is that there are no visible joints in the plaster of the murals. This, perhaps, means that the fine layer of plaster was applied in a single attempt all over the area of about one hundred and forty square feet, and was painted upon very fast. This is a daunting and extremely difficult task, even for an extraordinarily skilled fresco painter. While dealing with the absence of joints, present day experts, including Paramasivan, argue that the joints are cleverly camouflaged to make them imperceptible.⁷ Apart from that, the upper layer was so thin that the joints could have been made invisible by gentle battering, even while the new plaster was being applied. Those who debate against the use of the true fresco technique by the Chōla painters, point out that perceptible joints are one of the determinant factors for proving that the murals were done in the true fresco technique. Since there are no perceptible joints, it indicates that the tempera or even fresco secco technique was used.⁸

The conclusion is that the Chōla murals are executed in a true fresco technique has been accepted and equally contested. Some even say that they might have used a variant technique. At the same time, the efficacy of the simple tests conducted by Paramasivan cannot be rejected altogether, as the results indicate that the Chōla murals could be true fresco. More chemical analysis will throw light on this critical aspect.

Lack of Space

Whatever may be the technique employed by the Chōla painter in executing the murals, he carried out his task under lack of space and light. These factors could have affected any mural painter around the world, at any period. To execute such a massive panel, a painter needs adequate amount of space, so that he could draw back to ensure that the figures were drawn in the proper perspective and in the right proportions. A painter generally positions himself at a distance from his work and tries to contemplate and convince himself about the quality of his creation at every stage. Thus, space is a fundamental requirement, particularly when a large area is being worked upon for several days at a stretch. Even a minuscule mistake would be compounded to create an unsightly visual experience. However, Chōla painters had created extraordinary murals in spite of the lack of space, reflecting the exceptional skills of the painter. The figures in the murals

can hardly be faulted for lack of proportions. This makes one wonder as to how this could have been achieved.

Some may argue that the painter could have resorted to a common practice called 'cartoons' generally adopted by fresco painters. It is highly unlikely that the Chōla painter employed this technique. On the other hand, line sketches have been noticed below the pigment layer at some places, which effectively negates the use of cartoons. After scrutiny of the murals, it seems a basic sketch of red ochre was initially drawn. At several places the lines drawn beneath are visible, and it can also be observed that the painter corrected the flow of certain lines drawn underneath.

Conjecturally speaking, the Chōla painter could have prepared a true to size model sketch on materials like cloth. The theme, composition, relative and individual proportion of the figures, the colour schemes and all technical difficulties would have been ironed out and corrected if necessary, in the sketch itself. After which, it could have been transferred on to the wall by the master painter by sheer experience. The master sketch, prepared by the master painter might have helped the painter to achieve a pleasing and correct proportion between the figures, and in effect the entire painting, when it was completed.

Use of Colours and Shading

The palette of the Chōla painter was made up of basic colours of white, black, red, yellow, brown and green. Use of blue, as noticed by some, is not visible today.⁹ White was obviously derived from lime. The traditional source for black is lampblack and charcoal. However, a recent study shows that the black pigment was obtained from manganese dioxide.¹⁰ Red, yellow and brown were prepared from the respective ochre sources. Green was sourced from *Terre verte*. In addition, there are many hues and tones of these primary colours which were used by the painter to shade the figures. In general, white is extensively used, but is not the dominant colour of the composition. Yellow and red in different hues dominate the paintings. Black is used appropriately for colouring the hairdos, pupils of the eyes and at other parts where required. Green is used for tinting the human body, plant life and other figures. It is also preferred for the background but applied with a difference. It is observed that green applied to the figures has been well preserved. When used in the background, the pigment has peeled off, exposing the ground at many places. From observations, it appears that the green pigment has been well integrated with the ground when used to shade the figures, indicating that it was applied in the true fresco technique, like all other pigments. On the other hand, it seems to have been applied in the backgrounds in a different technique, so that it formed a distinctive layer and not integrated with the ground. Therefore, the binding was poor of these areas, and there is thus appreciable damage over the centuries.



Different Shading of the figures of gods, Sage teaching his royal disciples'

Scheme of Shading of the Figures: Figures of Gods

The Chōla painter shaded every figure – gods, demi-gods, venerated sages and devotees, human beings, different species of animals, plants and other objects like structures, natural features – with appropriate colours in a set pattern. The themes adopted are religious and deeply rooted in conventions and traditions. Therefore, the figures of deities and semi divine figures are appropriately coloured according to the prescriptions in the texts. Obviously, the choice of the painter was restricted by conventions, but he seems to have enjoyed his task and excelled amazingly even with the limitations. The texts prescribe a particular colour for a particular deity. It was the choice and skill of the painter to choose the exact tone of that colour. The Chōla painter's choice of tone is outstanding.

This is well exhibited in the colouring of the figures of Śiva. When Śiva is shown as Natarāja, he is appropriately in white with the lips, palms and the feet tinged in flaming red. When Śiva is shown along with seven mothers, he is of white complexion, because he is perceived and equated to the Dakṣiṇāmūrti aspect. Aptly, his complexion, as prescribed, is milky-white resembling the *sphaṭika*, crystal. Śiva, when shown with Umā, should be depicted in a coral red complexion. This convention is followed in the depictions of Śiva in Kailāsa. The Chōla painter confirms his extraordinary skills while colouring the depiction of Śiva as Tripurāntaka, where Śiva is depicted in brilliant red as prescribed by the texts. This tone not only follows the texts, but also adds to the *raudra* nature of the



Different shading of the figures of gods, Śiva as Tripurāntaka



Extraordinary line work, Story of Sundarar

Tripurāntaka form. Similarly, Pārvatī is appropriately depicted in white, when seen in company with Naṭarāja or green, when she is with Śiva in the Umāsahita form.

Conventions are faithfully followed in colouring the other figures of deities as well. For example, the figure of Viṣṇu appears at two places in a typical green complexion. Other deities like Brahmā, Kālī, Gaṇēśa, Sapta-mātrikās, divine musicians and devotees, sages etc. too are appropriately coloured. The *gaṇās* have been given special treatment with a variety of body hues and their hair too is coloured differently ranging from flaming red, golden yellow, green to black. The shading of the *rākshasas* figures is with golden yellow, red, green, and the *rishis* and divine devotees too were radiantly portrayed in golden yellow, green but rarely in red.

Royal Figures

The painter took special care while executing the royal figures. Rājarāja and his son Rājendra are depicted in a golden yellow complexion, while his queens have been portrayed in different complexion. Rājarāja had several queens hailing from various regions as mentioned in the inscriptions engraved on the walls of the temple.¹¹ The paintings depict the prominent queens at three places. The shading is similar in all the depictions as they are shown in the white, green and red complexions. By providing different body complexions, the painter suggests that they were from different regions of his kingdom. The royal children are of uniform body complexions. The royal harem, seen in the same panel, consisted of women with red, yellow, green and black complexions, probably indicating that their nativity was different.



Different shading of the commoners figures, Rājarāja worshipping the Liṅga

Others

Brahmanās are portrayed with red and yellow complexions. Rest of the commoners are shown in white, yellow and green shades. Officials in the court of Rājarāja, were again from several regions of his kingdom, as they are depicted in red, yellow, white, green and black. Even though the texts stipulate that the persons hailing from a particular region of India be depicted with an individualistic body complexion, it is very difficult to pinpoint the nativity of the figures in the Chōla murals based on the hues with which the figures are painted.

Animals and Plants

The murals have a plethora of animal life depicted on them. Their modelling is true to life in nature in many cases, conventional and mythical in others. The colouring is conventional, as the serpents are mostly shown in golden yellow with black spots, the elephants, when shown in their natural habitats, are in dark red, which is not their natural body complexion, while the monkeys are rendered in their natural form but conventional colours, and a wild boar is shown in white. The lions are depicted with white bodies and golden yellow manes, undoubtedly conventional in form and colouring. The figures of horses too is conventional at two places. However, there are some near to original depictions of owls, dogs, cheetahs and peacocks.

In plant life, there are both true and unconventional depictions. For example, the banyan tree is truly depicted with areal roots, berries and typical leaves forms. The coconut tree is conventional with broad leaves and a bunch of fruits. The plant life growing in the wild are conventional. Inanimate objects are generally treated with the



Extraordinary line, Story of Sundarar

same basic colours. The colouring of rocks looks highly imaginary in red, yellow and green. The Chōla painter had attained great achievement in shading the clouds. The clouds have typical trefoil edges and are vividly shaded in red and yellow. The inward gradient of shading adds a dimension of mass and volume to the depictions.

It is evident that the Chōla painters tried to shade a variety of objects using basic colours on their palette and mixed colours are very rare. When the compositions are observed as a whole, yellows dominate, while other colours are pleasingly integrated with it. Shading is solid without any voids. Other shading techniques like hatching (*patra*) or stipulating (*binduja*) as suggested in the texts, have not been employed anywhere in the compositions. In order to produce the feel of volume, the painter has shaded the area with a gradient, and a thicker tone is used along the lines and thinner tone in the middle.

Execution of Lines

The Chōla murals stand out for their brilliant line work. Nevertheless, the quality of execution is not consistent throughout. There are variations in the quality of brushwork indicating deployment of several painters for sketching and finishing. This is easily perceptible in every panel. It is easy to differentiate portions of the panel that are carefully

executed from the sections, where the quality of lines is inferior. Generally, the main segments of the composition are well finished. For example, in the Sage teaching his Royal disciples' panel, the figures of the sage and his disciples, the figures of Śiva with *mātrikās* are well finished with freely flowing lines. However, this is not the case with the execution of the banyan tree and the animals within it in the same panel. The overall composition and expressions brought out on the faces of the animals perched on the tree may be effective, but, the lines are too thick due to the inferior quality of brushwork, and do not flow rhythmically. The hillock with the animals, the sages in the crevices, and the plants in the same panel too are weak in execution.

In the Story of Sundarar panel, the lines are extraordinary. This is apparent, particularly in the journey of Sundarar on the white elephant. The whole segment, including the divine musicians and dancers are examples of brilliant execution by the Chōla painters. Exceptional care taken by the painter in finely finishing the details of ornamentation of the elephant is very evident. The painter with his clear linework vividly portrays the gentle swing of the chain with the bell. On the other hand, the soft bristles of the series of *kuñjarams* of their ornaments, gently move in the current of air created due to the movement of the elephant. The painter captured this movement sensitively with brilliant brushwork. The arcs of lines representing the bristles are admirably drawn.

Similarly, the scenes representing the elders assembled to witness Sundarar's marriage, the claim of the old man, Sundarar following the old man are all well executed. Considerable skill in civil draughtsmanship is exhibited in drawing the profiles of temples of Tiruvonnainallur and Triuāñjaikkalam. A conventional side elevation drawing of the *vimāna* represents the Tiruvonnainallur temple. The method of drawing the lines delineating the architectural features is very accurate, that it could be easily mistaken for an elevation drawn by a trained civil draughtsman. However, the painter, while drawing these lines, has taken sufficient care to infuse typical conventionalism in them, by not only depicting the doors set in the sidewall, but also the flats and the nails that were holding the planks intact of the door.



Extraordinary line, Story of Sundarar



Differential execution of lines in the same panel

The best exhibition of the skill of sketching lines is seen in the representation of the waves of the sea through which the mighty elephant is wading, before its ascent. Parallel spiral black lines representing the waves on a pure white background, interspersed with marine animals jutting their head out, captures the force of the waves of a rough sea. This indeed is a very difficult execution, because many such spiralling lines had to be drawn side by side. A small mistake committed in execution of even a single line would be a jarring visual experience for the viewer in a conglomeration of a bunch of black lines on a white background. Further, this portion appears exactly at the eyelevel, making it all the more crucial for the painter to be extremely cautious.

High level of skills in executing the figures is equally exhibited in portraying the dancing girls in Kailāsa. Similarly, the lines that define the divine dancer who defies gravity, as well as the flexibility of her body as she turns her back, as a result of swift gyrations of her dancing, are spectacularly captured. The level of skills of drawing such expressive lines observed in these figures is conspicuously absent in the execution of the Ēkādaśa Rudrās and Dvādaśa Ādityās.

In the Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja in the Kōyil panel, the painter displays high levels of skill in the execution of the magnificent figure of Naṭarāja. Even in their fragmentary state of preservation, the Rājarāja worshipping the Liṅga and Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti panels have excellently etched lines. The royal women assembled in the court of Rājarāja, and those peeping out from the balconies to witness the marriage of Śiva and Pārvati, are fine examples of the painters' skill.

A verse from the seminal *Vishṇudharmōttara* states that 'in order for an artist, to be reckoned knowledgeable in art, he must be an artist who efficiently paints according to the movement of the wind, the waves, wavelets and ripples, flames of fire and smoke, fluttering banners and apparel blown by the wind'.¹² Many instances, including the above mentioned, brilliantly passes the tests posed by the text. While the depiction of waves in the Story of Sundarar panel is outstanding, the painter exhibits his remarkable skill particularly in drawing the festoons and banners tied to the brim of the eaves. Generally, they are shown flying in the breeze. Similarly, the words of *Vishṇudharmōttara* were proved right when he drew the fluttering shawls of the royal ladies assembled in the Chidambaram temple.

It is evident that the panels display differential execution of lines and forms. The reason for this is easily understood. In all probability, the master artist(s), who were extremely adept in drawing lines in a controlled manner, were at work to execute those portions of the panel considered to be important. This includes the key scenes/figures, which always occur at the eye level, and the representation of important gods etc. The portions executed by the master painter generally cover a major portion of the panel. Others, not so skilful, were perhaps allowed to handle the not so important portions of the paintings. This system may have been necessary, as the method of execution was true fresco, and it required a few more skillful hands, apart from the master painter.

Composition and Utilisation of Space

All the fifteen chambers were relieved with murals during the Chōla period. In each chamber, two themes were painted, one each on either wall. From the exposed panels, it is evident that portrayal of a theme was never carried onto the adjacent chamber. The depiction may have ended with the inner offsets on the inner walls at the lower levels. It

cannot be determined whether it was carried on to the jambs. The jambs were definitely painted as seen in the painting of the jamb in the Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at the Kōyil panel. However, it is difficult to decide whether such depictions are fillers, or part of the adjoining theme. The segmental walls, connecting the inner and outer walls of the sanctum on the top too were utilised for continuing the rendering. It is likely that they were utilised in a flexible manner according to the requirements of space. All the walls of the corner chambers were utilised to portray a single theme and the depiction is continued on the segmental walls at the upper levels. The mode of painting of the axial chambers is not clear. There is no evidence to conclude about the method adopted for painting the ceiling, which in all probability, was painted with geometric designs to resemble a canopy (*vithāna*).

Thick red and yellow bands of about 30cm width were invariably drawn at the bottom of each panel. The rest of the space is utilized for the systematic portrayal of the themes. Every theme is subdivided into sub-themes, which are rendered in horizontal and vertical segments. A thick yellow band generally marks such segments. However, this was not a cardinal rule. Often, the segments integrate with each other without any demarcating lines. Generally, the most important segment of the composition is depicted at the eyelevel. This was necessitated due to the height of the wall. The portion above the eyelevel is generally utilised for depicting scenes like the Kailāsa, and congregation of divine persons like *rishis*, enlightened devotees etc. The strategy adopted by the Chōla painter in composing a panel was to portray it from the bottom to the top. While depicting the events, the painter has rendered the chronologically successive events in the horizontal as well vertical segments, like the depiction of events happening in the life of Sundarar.

A close study of the panels raises a pertinent question: whether the themes are painted in a sequence? The extant paintings imply that the sequence of themes seem to follow a pattern. The depiction of the specific events in the life of the devotees, and the king himself, precedes the portrayal of the different iconographic forms of Śiva, as one goes around the passage in a clockwise direction. It should be stated here that many Chōla panels are to be exposed in their entirety, because the Nāyaka layer still camouflages them in several chambers. This is indeed an insurmountable barrier, and hence there is no way to really gather any kind of information about all the panels to conclude firmly the sequence of themes.

The design of the passage was not an afterthought, which means that the painter knew well before the construction of the temple, about the available space for him to work. Therefore, the master painter would have had all the time plan his themes, method of

depiction, technique of execution, preparation of plaster and pigments, recruitment of assistants etc. There would not be much logistical problems for him, unlike the master architect. It is also almost certain that Rājārāja would have seen all the sketches and approved them personally. The availability of time, and the comprehensive and wholesome involvement of the patron, were the prime factors in encouraging the painter to fully concentrate on his project. The involvement resulted in creating extraordinary murals which have survived even after a thousand years.

Patronage

Another aspect, which should be taken into account, is the availability of time and sustained patronage of the painters. How long the Chōla painters took to complete the paintings in the passage is anybody's guess. It is for sure that the whole structure was filled with earth, as it grew course by course, during the first decade of the eleventh century. Therefore, the painter could not have entered the passage while the temple was under construction. If the date of the donation of the copper pot is to be placed in the finial is any indicator of the completion of the construction, and possibly the removal of dumped earth from the interior of the structure, then the painter could have entered the chamber by AD 1010. Rājārāja was too old by then, and he lived for another four years, at the most. Did the Chōla painter complete the painting by that time? Did the execution of the paintings, on the other hand, was carried out during Rājēndra's reign? There is no evidence to conclude precisely on these issues.

The donations to the temple and various images continued in full vigour even after the death of Rājārāja. Similarly, the work of painting too could have continued. It is very difficult to ascertain the role of Rājēndra in this project. On the other hand, it is a fact that Rājēndra transferred the endowments of the temple made by his father, to his new venture at Gaṅgai. The massive constructions of a city with its palaces and a gigantic temple could have created great demand for architects and masons at Gaṅgai. Therefore, they might have migrated in search of new pastures. It was pointed out elsewhere that the passage around the sanctum at Gaṅgai was neither designed to carry any murals, nor are there any remains of it. Therefore, the painters were perhaps allowed to remain at Thanjavur to complete the venture.

Notes

1. S. Paramasivan, 'Indian Wall Paintings', *Journal of Madras University*, Vol. XII, pp. 99-104 (1940). Based on his chemical analysis of the ground and pigments, he classifies the murals of India into four groups on the techniques employed in executing them. According to him, Group I consist of the murals of Ajanta and Bāgh. The rough plaster is of clay overlain by a fine plaster of lime. The pigments had been applied in the tempera technique with animal glue as the binding medium. Majority of the murals of Tamiḷnāḍu from the Kailāsanātha temple to this temple belong to Group II. The technique was characterised by the use of lime for both rough and fine plaster, later applied

when the former was still wet. The application of pigments was done when the fine layer was still wet, which means the murals are frescos. Ellora belongs to his Group III, exhibiting a combination of techniques employed at Ajanta on one hand, and the southern sites on the other; the rough plaster is of clay overlaid by several layers of lime plaster. Group IV is represented by Badāmi. The rough plaster is of clay mixed with animal glue and vegetable fibres. Over this, the pigments have been applied in tempera technique, like at Ajanta. Important texts on paintings like *Vishnudharmottara*, *Abhilashitārta Chintāmaṇi* and *Śilparatna* give the procedure for the preparation of the ground, pigments and application of the same. They provide a long list of material used in preparation of the above, which Paramasivan analyses in this work.

2. Many experts have discussed the fresco technique. The following description is a summary from their works. Some old works give excellent information like James Ward, *Fresco Painting Its Art and Technique* (London, 1909) and A.P. Laurie, *The Painter's Methods and Materials*, pp. 191-217 (London, 1926).
3. S. Paramasivam, 'The Mural Paintings in the Brihadisvara Temple at Tanjore: An Investigation into the Method', *Technical Studies*, Vol. V, No. 4, April 1937.
4. Mohammad Sana Ullah, 'Techniques of Mural Paintings in the Brihadesvara Temple, Tanjore', *Current Science*, Vol. 5 (November 1937), pp. 223-225.
5. S. Paramasivam, 'Techniques of Mural Paintings in the Brihadesvara Temple, Tanjore', *Current Science*, Vol. 6 (December, 1937), pp. 289-290.
6. S. Subbaraman, 'The Mural Painting in Brihadeeswara Temple, Thanjavur: A New Approach to their Study and Preservation', Margabandhu, C. (ed.) *Indian Archaeological Heritage*, K.V. Soundara Rajan Festschrift (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 745-752.
7. S. Paramasivam, *op. cit.*
8. Not much has been published contradicting the views of Paramasivan for want of samples which prevented further analytical studies.
9. S. Paramasivam, *op. cit.*
10. S. Subbaraman, *op. cit.*
11. V. Venkayya, 'Introduction' in E. Hultzsch, *South Indian Inscriptions*, Vol. II, Part I and II, p. 7. It seems that Lōkamādēvi was the principal queen. Other queens were Trailōkyamādēvi (alias Vānavan Mādēvi, mother of Rājēndra), Pañchavanmādēvi (for whom Rājēndra constructed a *pallippadaī*, memorial temple at Paṭṭiśvaram), Abhimānavallī, Ilādamādēvi and Prithvimahādēvi. This list is repeated in many other publications cited elsewhere in this volume.
12. *Vishnudharmōttara*, 43: 28.

The Murals

Commingling of Emotions

The Chōla painter outscores in infusing the figures with a tinge of appropriate emotion to make them live. So much so, it made the doyen of Indian art history and connoisseur *par excellence*, Sivaramamurthi, to comment in the following words, aptly highlighting the greatness of the murals of this temple.

If expression has to be taken as the criterion, by which a great art has to be judged, it is here in abundance in these Chōla paintings. The sentiment of heroism *vīra rasa* is clearly seen in Tripurāntaka's face and form; the figures and attitude of the *Rākshasas* determined to fight Śiva and the wailing tear-stained faces of their women, clinging to them in despair, suggest an emotion of pity *karuṇā* and terror *raudra*; Śiva as Dakṣiṇāmurthy ... is the mirror of peace *sānta*; the hands in *vismaya* of the dancer suggests the spirit of wonder *adbhuta*... the dwarf *gaṇās* in comic attitude ... represent *hāsyā*. The commingling of emotions is complete in the large Tripurāntaka panel, which is a jumble of *vīra*, *raudra* and *karuṇā*...

At many places in the murals, emotions described earlier have been vividly portrayed. This is the unique characteristic of the Chōla murals. The fundamental approach of the Chōla painter was to paint a figure live with dynamism, and make it communicate with the viewer. Every figure on the canvas, be it depictions of gods, divine figures, humans or even animals, are live and communicate. Only inanimate things like boulders, structures and the like, true to their nature, are mute. When seen closely, even they speak in a way, just by being in a place where momentous incidents were taking place.

Like all other ancient Indian painters, he definitely had mastery over the literature and lore of the land. Undoubtedly, the paintings reflect this. However, a closer look indicates that the kind of motifs he used to illustrate the emotions and expressions, were the result of his keen understanding of observation of common human, and animal behaviour and their body language. The Chōla painter simply used the lines and shades to infuse the right emotions while painting the figures, displaying the many facets of the celebrated *rasas*. The emotions are very appropriate to the situation and never in excess. The composition becomes an ensemble of figures, softly radiating expressions. This section of the book treads through the best of such exhibitions of emotions in the murals.

The Animals in the Banyan Tree: Example of Understanding of Animal Body Language

A Sage Teaching his Royal Disciples'

What many interpreted as 'some animals in a banyan tree' is indeed a manifestation of their response to the entry of a cobra, lashing its tongue. Among other animals, the monkeys were the quickest to react. The monkey that was depicted directly in front of the predator is running away, fear writ large on its face and unsure of its steps in spite of being capable of hopping from one branch to another with ease. By flexing the eyebrows and placing the eyeballs appropriately, the painter conveys the intensity of fear palpable in the animal. The other monkey, perched on the branch located behind the cobra is panicky, but sure of its steps. The other two monkeys are in different moods. One is away from the sight of the cobra, but aware of the threat. It wears an anxious look. The fourth monkey, with its back towards the predator, is unaware of the threat, and is seated relaxed on the branch, a soft target indeed! The pair of owls display no reactions at the entry of the predator and a squirrel, far away from the threat, is going on with its own business of gnawing at the berries of the banyan tree. The birds are generally keen and sensitive to any kind of threat, and they are in a state of alert. A stupid peacock bends its neck like an acrobat to watch the cobra. The whole depiction is a testimony to the painter's imaginative understanding of animal behaviour.



Assembly of Men: Example of Understanding of Human Body Language

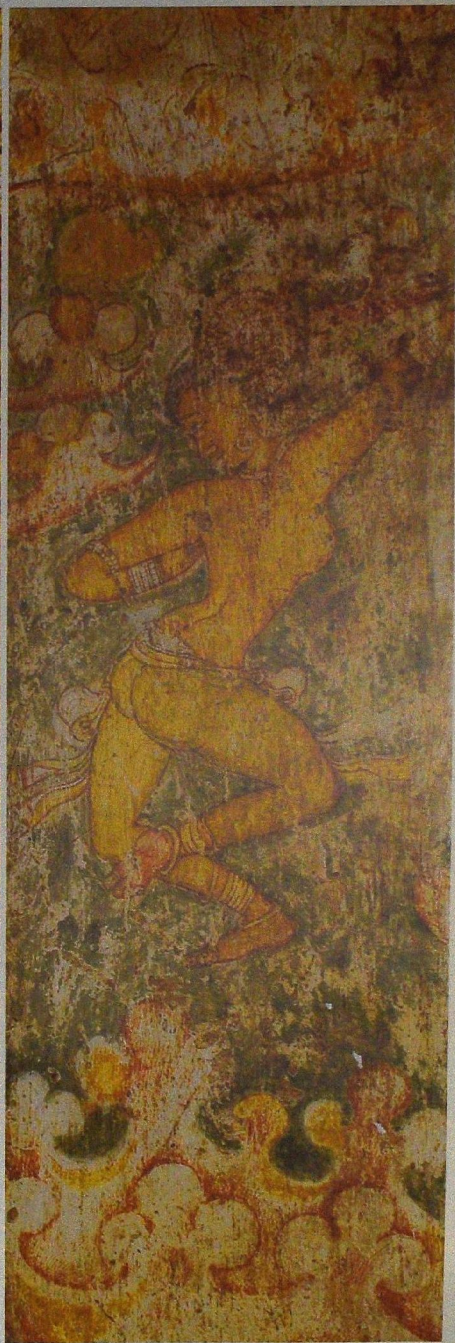
Story of Sundarar

If the previous illustration is an excellent display of body language of animals, this depiction illustrates the skill of the painter in portraying human reactions to a sudden and unheard of accusation. When Śiva, in the form of an old man claims that Sundarar was his slave, it was a rude shock to all those who were assembled to witness the marriage. They were perplexed at this absurd claim. If observed carefully, the expression on every one's face, and the posture of the hand clearly suggests the question: what a bizarre claim is this? The elders were unable to reconcile with the situation. The body postures of those seated on the left clearly indicates this aspect. Once the authenticity of the evidence is established, the body language changes. There are different reactions. The persons' who vouchsafe the palm-leaf cannot believe it. Again, the *rasa* here is *āscharya*. Disbelief is manifest through their body language. The painter's skill is that he has portrayed the same in a more dynamic fashion, which easily captures the imagination of the viewer. Others not directly connected, were in animated conversation about the turn of events. However, the petitioner and the accused are standing peacefully and emotionless for destiny to take its course. The accused, Sundarar in this case, knew clearly that he had lost. But was unable to fathom the cause of the situation, and he is shown in a state where any emotion is meaningless as he is just moments away from the joy of eternal bliss. The Lord too is portrayed with no emotions, as obviously He is the embodiment of all emotions.



Assembly of Divine Dancers, Musicians: Example of Imaginative Body Language *Story of Sundarar*

The depiction of divine dancers and musicians, including the *gaṇās*, display the remarkable imagination of Chōla painter. The divine dancers and musicians are welcoming Sundarar on his journey to Kailāsa. The portrayal of this situation is magnificent. The elephant is wading through the rough sea, and is about to take off at the horizon. The divine dancers and musicians are waiting in 'ākāśa' or ether. The location of this incident should be understood as the meeting point of the earth and ether. The divine party portrays an expression of *adbhuta*, at the brilliant journey of Sundarar. Among dancers, who has the supplest body, the female or male? Being divine entities, their body need not obey the general rules of human anatomy. The painter had indeed understood this fact. Therefore, he has depicted a male and a female, more or less in a similar posture, wherein spiralling twists of the body were executed defying the rules of anatomy. The painter has portrayed the male dancer with a twisted body. The female obviously defies gravity and twists her head to align it with her back while executing a divine *karaṇa*. The highly charged *gaṇas* are involved in every kind of activity to create music. The synergy is extraordinary. Some are playful. Some are very tense, as they have to keep up the high levels of energy. The painter by twisting and twirling the lines has created *gaṇas* in different attitudes and moods. All, very imaginative indeed!



Royal and Common Women at the Kōyil: Example of Contrasting Behaviours

Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at 'The Kōyil'

The Chōla painter's perception of human behaviour is extraordinary. If proof is required, the depiction of women from different standings in society, and their contrasting behaviour in this panel is a perfect example. The gorgeously dressed royal women are seated in the precincts of the temple. Their rank is slightly lower than the queens. Yet, they are not mean in displaying their sense of fashion. Their attire is different from one another. Considering their status, their freedom is unlimited. They are not discussing as a group, but conversing in pairs. Interestingly, the one seated in the middle is not interested in conversing with of those seated by her side. The lack of etiquette is more evident, especially in one of them who is seated showing her back to the others.

On the other hand, the common women, assembled at the other end are shown in a simple manner. Captivated, by the presence of god and their king, all are in *añjali*. Their dress and ornaments are simple. The behaviour is exemplary as they are totally immersed in worship. These contrasting depictions by the painter clearly indicates the strength of his observation of the behaviour of women in Chōla society.



The Smile of Naṭarāja: An Example of Eternal Emotion

Rājarāja worshipping Naṭarāja at 'The Kōyil'

The cosmic dance of Śiva as Naṭarāja as performed in Tillai is exhilarating. According to A.K. Coomaraswamy, the image of Naṭarāja as perceived in Tamil Nadu is a great “conception itself as a synthesis of science, religion and art”. According to him and other authorities, the great cosmic dance symbolizes the ‘five activities (*Pañcakṛityā*), viz: *Śṛisṭi* (overlooking, creation, evolution), *Sṭhiti* (preservation, support), *Samhāra* (destruction, evolution), *Tirobhava* (veiling, embodiment, illusion, and giving rest), *Anugraha* (release, salvation, grace)’. It is considered that Tillai is at the centre of the universe, and this centre is within the devotees. While every attribute of this great conception of art had invited the attention of composers, the smile on His face has not been dealt with in much detail. The *āgamas* prescribe a smiling face. However, Appar brilliantly describes the smile as *kovvai sevvāyīṛ kumiḷ sirippu*. A budding smile from the mouth that is as red as a ripened core of an ivy-gourd. If the image is closely observed, it is easy to notice the red tinged lips. Of course, the painter wonderfully portrayed the eternal smile.



Women Peeping from Balconies: Example of Divine Involvement

Śiva as Kalyāṇasundaramūrti

Kālidāsa, in his *Kumārasambhava* narrates that the women of Himavān's city, having learnt the procession of Śiva is passing through the streets dropped the work they were doing as it was and hurried out to the balconies, anxious to see the Lord and his beauty. By their mere presence, the balconies became radiant like a lotus flower. Their eyes, so black and active like a bee, were transfixed at Śiva's great beauty and other sensory parts of their body functioned reflexively. Some of them were conversing at the perfect match between Śiva and Pārvatī. If the words of Kālidāsa make one imagine the beauty of the Śiva-Pārvatī marriage, and the behaviour of women witnessing the radiant beauty of both, then the Chōla painter is not far behind as he captures the same with his brush and easel, to provide a magnificent visual treat. Unfortunately, the figures of Śiva and Pārvatī are lost forever, leaving only a small fragment of Śiva's waist for the viewer to imagine their beauty. However, the depiction of women peeping through the balconies is well preserved. The forms and execution of these figures puts even Kālidāsa's words in shadow.



Asuras, Their Guru (?) and Wives: Example of Contrasting Emotions

Śiva as Tripurāntaka

In a terrible battlefield, where the omnipotent Mahādēva was out to destroy the three demons, empowered with a strange boon, in a trice, there is no place for any woman. However, the Chōla painter chose to depict the wives of the three chief demons, Vidyumali, Tārakāksha and Kamalāksha in this panel. They are not passive spectators. On the other hand, they are trying to prevent their husbands from indulging in a futile war with Śiva. It is a fight against their own god, whom they had religiously worshipped. Perhaps, they were sure that the cumulative effect of their devotion would determine their destiny for good, and hence decided to fight so fiercely to uphold their prestige as great warriors. To their undemanding wives, it was futile to fight Śiva. To them, the longevity of their *patis* was more important. The painter understood this chasm between these two extreme states of emotion. The wives plead with their husbands to refrain from fighting, by stopping them. Their faces, particularly the eyes, reflect the despair. The women, as Sivaramamurti puts it, are clinging to them in despair, suggesting an emotion of pity *karuṇā*. The men are ferocious and wielding long swords. They do not want to yield to the wisdom of their wives. On the other hand, in a corner among the *asuras*, is a figure of an old man balancing his old body over his *danda*. His face is gloomy, either pondering on a strategy to win the battle, or thinking about the foolishness of his disciples in fighting the supreme god. Is he the guru of the *asuras* or Maya, the architect who created the castles? It is difficult to say. The Chōla painter brilliantly captures these contrasting emotions of all the participants in the futile fight. Further, the painter had brilliantly composed the canvas, faithfully followed the prescriptions of the *Chitrasūtra* of Vishṇudharmottara (43:30) by not drawing one figure in front of another.

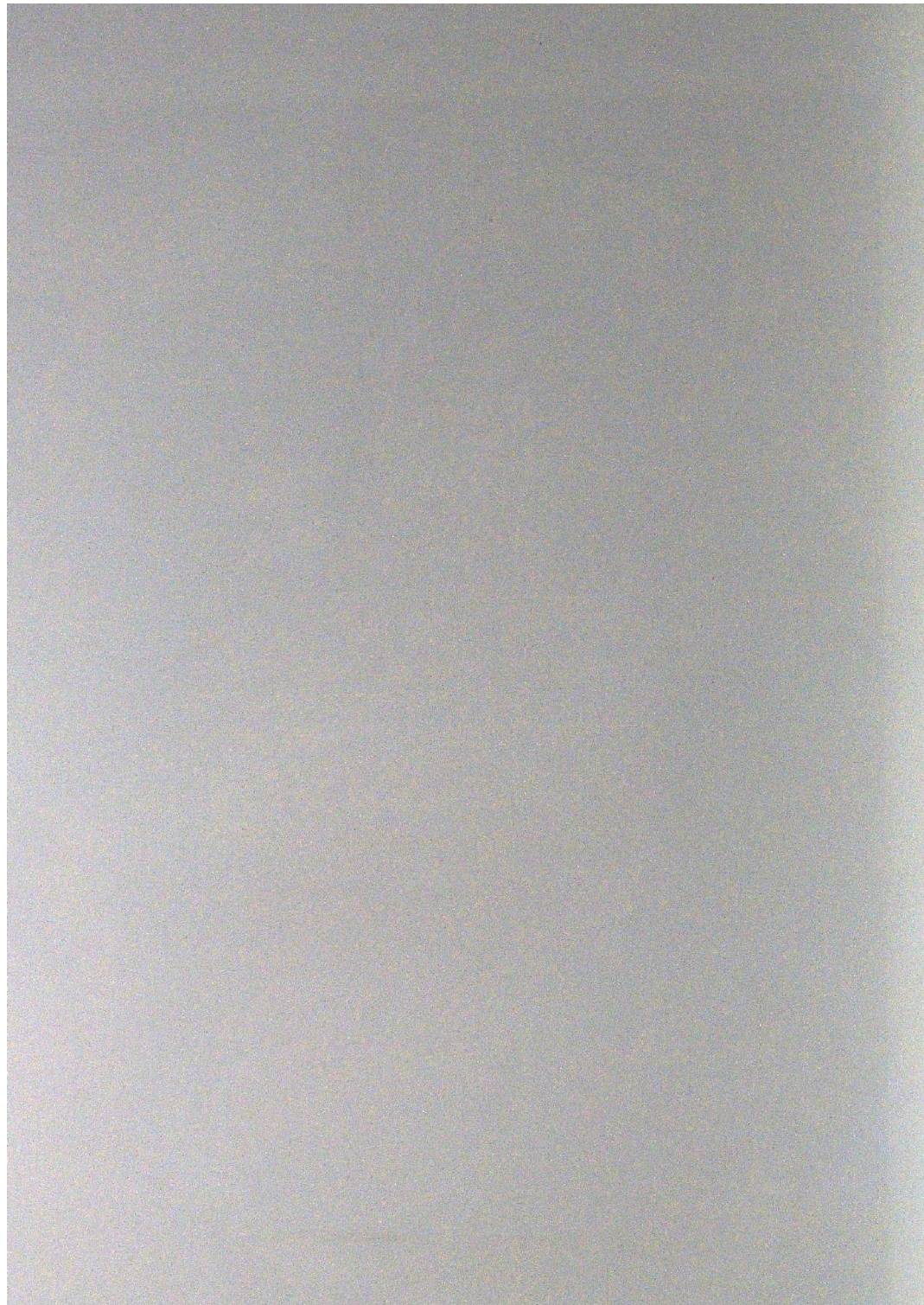


Tripurāntaka: Embodiment of Raudra

Śiva as Tripurāntaka

It was mentioned elsewhere that the portrayal of Tripurāntaka is the *magnum opus* creation of the Chōla painter. His terrific rage, *aṭṭahāsa*, was sufficient to burn the three castles. His furious emotion is brought out beautifully on his face. Every element of his face radiates this anger. The eyebrows are bent upwards, and the eyeballs are looking downwards in anger. The third eye is open, positioned towards the *asuras*. The nostrils are swollen due to heavy breathing in anger. The lips are thickened. Adding a stellar effect to all this is the brilliant use of coral red and white pigments, suggestive of the strong emotions that Śiva was showing.





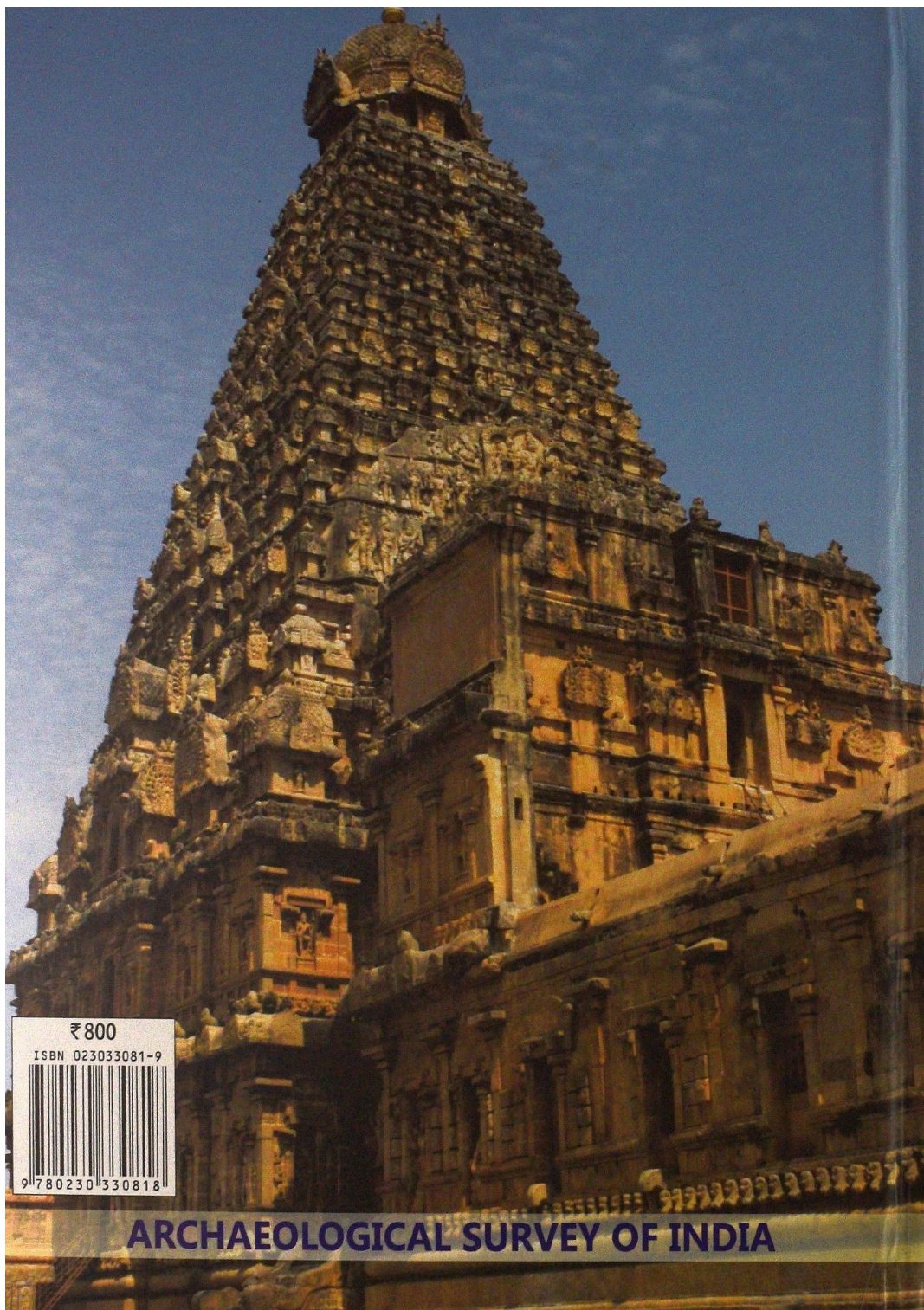
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